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PERIL

AT END

HOUSE



Agatha Christie

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A List of characters to help the reader identify who is who, and how they are connected to each other. **Cultural notes** to explain historical and other references. **A Glossary** of words that some readers may not be familiar with are explained. There is also a **Recording** of the story.

Agatha Christie

Peril at End House

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Chapter 1 *The Majestic Hotel*

No seaside town in the south of England is, I think, as attractive as St Loo. I believe the coast of Cornwall, where it is situated, is just as fascinating as that of the south of France.

‘Don’t you agree?’ I asked my friend, Hercule Poirot.

He was smiling to himself and did not answer my question immediately. I repeated it.

‘A thousand pardons, Hastings. I was thinking of that part of the world you mentioned just now and the last winter that I spent there and of the events which occurred.’

I remembered. A murder had been committed on the Blue Train, the luxurious night train that runs between Paris and the French Riviera. Thanks to Poirot’s investigations, the killer had been found.

‘How I wish I had been with you,’ I said.

‘I, too,’ said Poirot. ‘I missed your lively imagination, Hastings. One needs some amusement.’

‘Tell me, Poirot,’ I said, ‘are you never tempted to begin your detective work again?’

‘No, this retired life suits me. What could be a greater thing to do than to retire at the height of my fame? They say of me: “That is Hercule Poirot – the great – the *detective unique*! There was never any one like him; there never will be again!” I ask no more. I am modest.’ He sat back with self-satisfaction.

We were sitting on one of the terraces of *The Majestic*, the biggest hotel in St Loo, which stands overlooking the sea. The sky was clear and the August sun was shining. If these weather conditions continued, we would have a perfect holiday. I picked up the morning newspaper. ‘Still no news of that pilot, Seton, in his round-the-world flight,’ I said. ‘That seaplane of

his, *The Albatross*, is a great invention. It makes me feel proud to be an Englishman.' My attention then went to the political news. 'They seem to be giving the Home Secretary a bad time of it.'

'He has his troubles, that one. Ah! Yes. He needs my help . . .'

I stared at him. With a slight smile, Poirot took a letter from his pocket which he threw across to me. I read it with a feeling of excitement.

'Poirot,' I cried. 'He begs you to investigate this matter for him – as a personal favour.'

'I know that, my dear Hastings. I have read the letter myself.'

'This will put an end to our holiday,' I cried.

'No, no – there is no question of that. I will write very politely that I have retired – I am finished.'

'You are *not* finished,' I exclaimed warmly.

Poirot smiled. 'There speaks the good friend. And the little grey cells of my brain, they still function – the order, the method – it is still there. But when I have retired, my friend, I have retired! Hercule Poirot has solved his last case.'

'How can you be so sure that someone or something won't persuade you?'

'Impossible,' he replied, 'that anyone could change the decision of Hercule Poirot.'

'Impossible, Poirot?'

'You are right, mon ami, one should not use such a word. If a bullet hits the wall by my head, I would certainly investigate the matter! One is human after all!'

I smiled. A little stone had just hit the terrace beside us, and Poirot picked it up. 'Yes – one is human.'

Suddenly he rose and went down the steps that led to the garden. Just then, a girl came running towards us. I had just

noticed how pretty she was, when Poirot fell. The girl and I helped him to his feet.

‘A thousand pardons,’ said Poirot. ‘Mademoiselle, you are most kind. It is a twisted ankle, that is all. But if you could help me, Hastings . . .’

With me on one side and the girl on the other, we got Poirot on to a chair. I suggested calling a doctor, but my friend said no. ‘It is nothing. Painful only for the moment. Mademoiselle, I thank you a thousand times. You were most kind. Sit down, I beg of you.’

She took a chair and joined us.

‘What about a cocktail?’ I suggested. ‘It’s just about the time.’

‘Well,’ she hesitated. ‘Thanks very much.’

‘Martini?’

‘Yes, please – dry.’

On my return, I found Poirot and the girl in conversation.

‘Imagine, Hastings,’ he said, ‘that house there on the top of the cliff that we have admired so much belongs to Mademoiselle.’

‘Indeed?’ I said, though I couldn’t remember having expressed any admiration. ‘It looks rather lonely.’

‘It’s called *End House*,’ said the girl. ‘I love it – but it’s in very poor condition. There have been Buckleys here for two or three hundred years and I’m the last of the family.’

‘That is sad. You live there alone, Mademoiselle Buckley?’

‘Oh! I’m away a lot and when I’m at home there’s usually a crowd of friends coming and going.’

‘So modern. I was picturing you in a dark mysterious mansion, full of ghosts and dark family secrets,’ Poirot said.

‘What an imagination! No, there’s no ghost – or if there is, it’s a kind one. I’ve had three escapes from sudden death in as many days, so I *must* be lucky!’

‘Escapes from death? That sounds interesting, Mademoiselle.’

‘Oh! They were just accidents you know.’ She shook her head as a bee flew past. ‘I hate the way these bees come right past your face. That’s the second time in just a few minutes.’ Miss Buckley took off the hat she was wearing and put it down beside her. ‘Too hot!’ she laughed.

I looked at her with interest. Her untidy dark hair made her look young and delicate. The small, vivid face, the enormous dark-blue eyes, and something else. Was it a love of danger? There were dark shadows under her eyes.

From round the corner a red-faced man appeared. ‘Nick,’ he was saying. ‘Nick – Nick!’

Miss Buckley rose to her feet. ‘George – here I am.’

‘Freddie’s desperate for a drink. Come on, girl,’ he said.

She introduced her friend. ‘This is Commander Challenger . . .?’

But to my surprise Poirot did not give his name. He rose, bowed, and said, ‘Of the English Navy? I have great admiration for the English Navy.’

This type of comment is not typical for an Englishman. Commander Challenger’s face went even redder. Nick Buckley took control of the situation and said energetically, ‘Come on, George. Let’s find Freddie and Jim.’ She smiled at Poirot. ‘I hope the ankle will be all right.’

With a nod of the head to me she put her hand through Challenger’s arm and they disappeared round the corner together.

‘So that is one of Mademoiselle’s friends,’ said Poirot thoughtfully. ‘Give me your expert opinion, Hastings. Is he what you would call a “good fellow” – an honest, respectable man?’

‘He seems all right – yes.’

The girl had left her hat behind. Poirot picked it up and twirled it round on his finger. 'Has he feelings for her? What do you think, Hastings?'

'My dear Poirot! How can I tell? Here – give me that hat. I'll take it to her.'

Poirot gave a little laugh, then laid a finger against the side of his nose. '*We* will return the hat – to *End House* – and so we will see the charming Miss Nick again. She is a pretty girl – eh?'

'Well – you saw for yourself. Why ask me?'

'Because, sadly, I cannot tell. To me, nowadays, anything young is beautiful. But you are more modern than I am. She has sex appeal?'

'The answer is very much a yes. Why are you so interested in the lady?'

'*Mon ami*, I am much more interested in her hat. But look, my dear old imbecile – it is not necessary to employ the grey cells – the eyes are all that is needed. Look, look!'

And at last I saw what he had been trying to show me. His finger was stuck neatly through a hole in the edge of the hat.

'Did you observe the way Mademoiselle Nick moved suddenly when a bee flew past? She said it was the second time in a few minutes.'

'But a bee couldn't make a hole like that.'

'Exactly, Hastings! *But a bullet could!* A bullet like *this*.'

He showed me a small object in the palm of his hand. 'A used bullet, *mon ami*. This was what hit the terrace when we were talking, not a little stone!'

'You mean . . .'

'I mean that one inch of a difference and that hole would not be through the hat but through the head. Now do you see why I am interested, Hastings? You were right, my friend, when

you told me not to use the word “impossible”. Ah! that would-be murderer made a bad mistake when he shot at his victim within yards of Hercule Poirot! You see now why we must go to *End House* and talk with Mademoiselle Buckley? *Three near escapes from death in three days*. That is what she said. We must act quickly, Hastings. The peril is very close at hand.’

Chapter 2 End House

‘Poirot,’ I said later. ‘I have been thinking.’

‘An admirable exercise, my friend. Continue it.’

We were at lunch.

‘This shot must have been fired quite close to us. And yet we did not hear it. It is strange.’

‘No, it is not. Some sounds – you get used to them so soon that you hardly notice they are there. All this morning, my friend, speedboats have been making trips in the bay. You complained at first – soon, you did not even notice. But you could fire a machine gun almost and not notice it when one of those boats is on the sea.’

‘Yes, that’s true,’ I agreed.

‘Ah!’ said Poirot. ‘Mademoiselle Buckley and her friends. They are to lunch here, it seems, therefore I must return the hat. But it doesn’t matter. The situation, all on its own, is serious enough to require a visit.’

He hurried across and gave the hat to Miss Buckley with a bow just as she, Commander Challenger, another man and another woman were sitting down.

My friend was silent during our meal and as soon as the other lunch party had left the room, he rose to his feet. They were just getting comfortable in the lounge when Poirot marched up and spoke to Nick Buckley. ‘Mademoiselle, may I have a little word?’

She moved a few steps aside. Almost immediately I saw an expression of surprise pass over her face at the words Poirot was saying. In the meantime, Challenger offered me a cigarette. I thought that I was more his kind of man than the tall, fair young man he had been lunching with. The woman in the group was an unusual type – she had fair, almost colourless hair and her face

was completely white, yet attractive. Her eyes were very light grey with large pupils. Suddenly she spoke. 'Sit down – till your friend has finished with Nick.'

She seemed to me the most tired person I had ever met. Tired in mind, as though she had found everything in the world to be empty and valueless.

'Miss Buckley very kindly helped my friend when he twisted his ankle this morning,' I explained as I accepted her offer.

She looked at me thoughtfully. 'Nothing wrong with his ankle now, is there?'

I felt myself turning pink.

'Oh, well. I'm glad to hear Nick didn't invent the whole thing. She's one of my oldest friends, but Nick is such a liar, isn't she, Jim? That story about the brakes of the car – Jim says it wasn't true at all.'

The fair man in a soft voice said, 'I know something about cars.' He half turned his head. Outside was a long, red car. It looked new.

'Is that yours?' I asked.

He nodded. 'Yes.'

Poirot joined us at that moment. I rose; he gave a quick bow to the party, and we left the room.

'It is arranged. We are to call on Mademoiselle at *End House* at half past six.'

★ ★ ★

We started out from the hotel at six o'clock.

'It seems incredible,' I remarked, as we descended the steps of the terrace. 'To shoot anyone in a hotel garden. Only a madman would do such a thing.'

‘I disagree. To begin with, the garden is deserted. It is usual to sit on the terrace overlooking the bay – only *I* sit overlooking the garden. And even then, I saw nothing. There are many large bushes and trees, you observe. Anyone could hide himself while he waited for Mademoiselle to pass this way from her house. And she *would* come this way. To come round by the road from *End House* would be much longer!’

‘All the same,’ I said, ‘the risk was enormous. He might have been seen – and you can’t make shooting look like an accident.’

‘Not like an *accident* – no.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing – a little idea. But let us not think about that for a moment. Think instead of this: the motive for Mademoiselle’s death cannot be obvious. If it *were* – then it would be too great a risk to take. People would say, “Where was X when the shot was fired?” No, the would-be murderer cannot be obvious. And that, Hastings, is why I am afraid! Yes, these “accidents” – I want to hear about them!’

He turned back abruptly. ‘It is still early. We will go by the road. The garden has nothing to tell us. Let us inspect the other way up to *End House*.’

We walked out of the front gate of the hotel and up a sharp hill to the right. At the top was a small road with a notice on the wall: ‘TO END HOUSE ONLY.’ After a few hundred yards there was an abrupt turn and we could see a pair of broken entrance gates. Inside these, to the right, was a small cottage. The small garden round it was well-kept, the window frames had been recently painted and there were bright curtains at the windows. Picking some flowers was a man in a well-worn jacket. He was about sixty; six foot tall at least, with bright-blue eyes.

‘Good afternoon,’ he said as we passed.

‘Good afternoon,’ I replied and we went on up the path.

End House itself was large and clearly in bad condition. Poirot rang the bell and the door was opened by a middle-aged woman. Miss Buckley, she said, had not yet returned. Poirot explained that we had an appointment and we were taken into the living room to wait. This room looked onto the sea and was full of sunshine. There were family portraits on the walls, some of which were very good. There was a newspaper open on the end of the sofa. Poirot picked it up. It was the *St Loo Weekly Herald and Directory*, and he was reading it when the door opened and Nick Buckley came in.

‘Bring the ice, Ellen,’ she called over her shoulder, then spoke to us. ‘Well, here I am – and I am extremely curious about why you want to see me.’

The woman who had opened the door to us came into the room with ice and a tray of bottles. Nick mixed cocktails expertly, then she said sharply, ‘Well?’

‘Mademoiselle.’ Poirot took the cocktail from her hand. ‘To your good health, Mademoiselle – your *continued* good health.’

She frowned. ‘Is anything the matter?’

‘Yes, Mademoiselle. This . . .’

He held out his hand with the bullet on the palm of it. She picked it up with a puzzled frown. ‘It’s a bullet.’

‘Exactly. Mademoiselle – it was not a bee that flew past your face this morning – it was this bullet.’

‘Well, I’m damned,’ said Nick frankly. ‘I really *am* a lucky girl! That’s number four.’

‘Yes,’ said Poirot. ‘That is number four. I want, Mademoiselle, to hear about the other three “accidents”. I want to be very sure, Mademoiselle, that they *were* accidents.’

‘Why, of course! What else could they be?’

‘Mademoiselle, what if someone is trying to kill you?’

Nick laughed. ‘My dear man, who on earth do you think would try to kill *me*? I’m not a beautiful young heiress whose death would leave millions to her heir. I wish somebody *was* trying to kill me – that would be exciting, if you like – but I’m afraid there’s not a hope!’

‘Will you tell me, Mademoiselle, about those accidents?’

‘Of course – but they were just stupid things. There’s a heavy painting that hangs over my bed. It fell in the night. By chance I had heard a door banging somewhere in the house and went down to shut it – and so I escaped. It would probably have fallen on my head and killed me. That’s Number 1.

‘Number 2’s weaker still. There’s a cliff path down to the sea. I go down that way to swim. A very large rock fell down behind me, just missing me. The third thing was quite different. Something went wrong with the brakes of my car – the garage man explained what the problem was, but I didn’t understand it. Anyway, if I’d gone through the gate and down the hill, the brakes wouldn’t have worked and I’d have crashed straight into a building. But because I had left my jacket behind, I had turned back and I only crashed into the bushes at the side of the road.’

‘And you cannot tell me what the problem was?’

‘You can ask them at Mott’s Garage. It was something quite simple and mechanical that had been taken out. I wondered if Ellen’s boy had done it. Boys do like playing about with cars. Of course Ellen insisted he’d never been near it.’

‘Where is your garage, Mademoiselle?’

‘Round the other side of the house.’

‘Is it usually locked?’

Nick’s eyes opened in surprise. ‘Of course not.’

‘So anyone could have touched the car without being seen?’

‘Well, yes. But it’s silly to think that anyone would.’

‘No, Mademoiselle: It is not silly. You are in danger – serious danger. I tell it to you. I, Hercule Poirot! You know my name, eh?’

‘Oh, yes.’

Poirot observed her carefully. ‘Mademoiselle, you are a polite little liar.’ (I was shocked, remembering what her friend had said at the *Majestic Hotel* that day after lunch.) ‘I forget – you are only a child – you would not have heard. Ah, fame passes so quickly! My friend there – he will tell you.’

‘Monsieur Poirot is – er – was – a great detective,’ I explained, slightly embarrassed.

‘Ah! My friend,’ cried Poirot. ‘Is that all you can find to say? Say to Mademoiselle that I am a *detective unique*, the greatest that ever lived!’

‘That is now unnecessary,’ I said coldly. ‘You have told her yourself.’

‘Ah, yes, but I should not have to praise myself.’

‘One should not keep a dog and have to bark oneself,’ agreed Nick with pretend sympathy. ‘Who is the dog, by the way? Dr Watson, I presume.’

‘My name is Hastings,’ I said coldly.

‘Well, this is all wonderful,’ said Nick, ‘but seriously, Monsieur Poirot, the whole thing *must* be an accident.’

‘You are as obstinate as the devil!’

‘That’s where I got my name from. They say my grandfather sold his soul to the devil, Monsieur Poirot, and in England the devil is also known as Old Nick. Well, my grandfather’s name was Nicholas so everyone round here called him Old Nick. I went everywhere with him and so they called *me* Young Nick.

My real name is Magdala. There have been lots of Magdalas in the Buckley family. There's one up there.' She pointed to a picture on the wall.

'Ah!' said Poirot. Then, looking at a portrait hanging over the fireplace, he said, 'Is that your grandfather, Mademoiselle?'

'Yes, good, isn't it? Jim Lazarus offered to buy it, I wouldn't sell. I loved Old Nick and I couldn't sell his portrait.'

'Ah!' Poirot was silent, then he said very seriously, 'Listen, Mademoiselle. I beg you to be serious. Today, somebody shot at you with a Mauser pistol.'

'A Mauser?' She was surprised.

'Yes, why? Do you know of anyone who has a Mauser pistol?'

She smiled. 'I've got one myself. Dad brought it back from the War. It's in that drawer.' She crossed the room and pulled the drawer open.

'Oh!' she said. 'It's – it's gone.'

Chapter 3 Accidents?

With the discovery of the missing pistol, Nick stopped being amused. She still tried to behave as though she wasn't too worried, because it was her habit, but there was a distinct difference in her manner.

Poirot turned to me. 'You remember, Hastings, the little idea I mentioned in the hotel garden? Well, supposing Mademoiselle had been discovered in that garden with a bullet in her head? She might not have been found for some hours – few people pass that way. And supposing beside her hand is her own pistol. There is no doubt that the good Madame Ellen would identify it. There would be suggestions, no doubt, of worry or of sleeplessness . . .'

'That's true,' Nick said. 'I've been terribly worried recently. Everybody's been telling me I'm not myself. Yes, they'd say all that . . .'

'It was suicide. Mademoiselle's fingerprints, and nobody else's, would be conveniently on the pistol – it would be very simple and convincing. There must be no more of this. We are here, my friend and I, to put a stop to that!'

I was pleased to hear the 'we' – Poirot has a habit of sometimes ignoring my existence. 'Yes,' I said quickly, 'you must not be alarmed, Miss Buckley. We will protect you.'

'And the first thing to do,' said Poirot, 'is to ask some questions.'

He smiled at her in a friendly manner.

'To begin with, Mademoiselle, have you any enemies?'

'I'm afraid not,' she said apologetically.

'Good. We can forget about that possibility then. And now we ask the question of the detective novel – who profits by your death, Mademoiselle?'

'I can't imagine,' said Nick. 'There is a huge mortgage on the house because we had to pay two lots of taxes quite soon after each other, because first my grandfather died – just six years ago, and then my brother died three years ago.'

'And your father?' Poirot asked.

'He died in 1919 and my mother died when I was a baby. I lived here – Grandfather and Dad didn't get on, so Dad left me with my grandfather and went travelling around the world until the War. Gerald, my brother, didn't get on with Grandfather either, but Grandfather said I was just like him.' She laughed. 'He was a gambler and was always losing money rather than winning it. When he died, he left hardly anything – only the house and land. I was sixteen and Gerald was twenty-two. When Gerald was killed in a car accident, *End House* came to me.'

'And after you, Mademoiselle? Who is your nearest relation?'

'My cousin, Charles Vyse. He's a lawyer – good and very boring. He tries to stop me spending lots of money. He arranged the mortgage on the house for me and made me rent the cottage to some Australians. Croft their name is. They are always bringing us vegetables they've grown. Very, very friendly people. She's an invalid, poor thing, and lies on a sofa all day.'

'How long have they been here?'

'Oh, about six months.'

'I see. Now, apart from this cousin of yours – is he on your father's side of the family or your mother's, by the way?'

'Mother's.'

'Now, besides this cousin, have you any other relatives?'

'Some very distant cousins in Yorkshire – Buckleys.'

'No one else?'

'No.'

'Now, Mademoiselle – your servants.'

'I have two. Ellen cooks and cleans and generally looks after me. Her husband's the gardener, though not a very hard-working one. I pay them very little because I let them have the child here and if I have a party, we get people to help serve drinks and food. I'm giving a party on Monday, in fact. It's the beginning of the St Loo festival week, you know.'

'Monday – and today is Saturday. Yes. Yes. And now, Mademoiselle, your friends – the ones with whom you were having lunch today?'

'Well, Freddie Rice is my greatest friend. She's had a miserable life. She is married to a man who drank and was a drug addict. She had to leave him a year or two ago. I wish she'd get a divorce and marry Jim Lazarus.'

'Lazarus? Is he the son of the London art dealer?'

'Yes. Jim's the only son. He's very rich, of course. Did you see that new car of his? And he's in love with Freddie. They're staying at The *Majestic* over the weekend and are coming to the party here on Monday.'

'And Madame Rice's husband?'

'Oh, nobody knows *where* he is. It makes it very difficult for Freddie. You can't divorce a man when you don't know where he is. Poor Freddie,' said Nick sadly, 'she is so short of money.'

'Yes, yes, that must be unpleasant for her. And the good Commander Challenger?'

'George? I've known George all my life – well, for the last five years! He's a good man, George.'

'He wishes you to marry him – eh?'

'He does mention it now and again. But what would be the use of George and me marrying one another? Neither of us have got any money. And I'd get very bored with George. After all, he must be at least forty.'

'I agree, much too old for you,' said Poirot. 'And now, Mademoiselle, tell me more about these accidents. The picture, for instance?'

'It has been hung up again with a new cord. You can come and see it if you like.' She led the way. The picture was an oil painting in a heavy frame. It hung directly over the head of the bed.

With a quiet, 'May I, Mademoiselle?' Poirot removed his shoes and stood upon the bed. He examined the picture and the cord, and tested the weight of the painting, then he got down from the bed. 'If that fell on one's head – no, it would not be pretty. Was the old cord like this one, Mademoiselle?'

'Yes, but not so thick.'

'I should like to look at that piece of cord. Is it in the house somewhere?'

'I expect the man who put the new cord on the picture just threw the old one away.'

'A pity. I wish I had seen it. It may have been an accident. It is impossible to say. But the damage to the brakes of your car – that was not an accident. And the stone that rolled down the cliff – I should like to see the spot where that occurred.'

Nick took us to the cliff. The sea below us glittered blue in the sunshine and a path led down the face of the rock. Nick described just where the accident had happened and Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

'How many ways are there into your garden, Mademoiselle?'

'There's the front way – past the cottage. And a door in the wall half-way up that lane. Then there's a gate just along here on the cliff. It takes you to a path that leads up from that beach to the *Majestic Hotel*. And then, of course, you can go straight through a gap in the bushes into the *Majestic* garden – that's the way I went this morning.'

‘And your gardener – where does he work?’

‘He’s usually in the kitchen garden.’

‘Round the other side of the house?’ said Poirot. ‘So that if anyone came in here and then moved a stone, one large enough to kill you, he probably wouldn’t be seen by anyone.’

Nick looked slightly sick. ‘Do you – do you really think that is what happened?’ she asked. ‘It seems so perfectly pointless.’

Poirot took the bullet out of his pocket again. ‘*That* was not pointless, Mademoiselle,’ he said gently. ‘Tell me, these friends of yours, Madame Rice and Monsieur Lazarus – they have been here, how long?’

‘Freddie came on Wednesday and stayed with some people near Tavistock for a couple of nights. She came here yesterday. Jim has been touring about, I believe.’

‘And Commander Challenger?’

‘He lives at Devonport. He comes over in his car whenever he can – at the weekends mostly.’

There was a silence, and then Poirot said suddenly, ‘Have you a friend whom you can trust, Mademoiselle? Other than Madame Rice. Because I want you to have a friend to stay with you – immediately.’

Nick said, ‘There’s Maggie . . .’

‘Who is Maggie?’

‘One of my cousins from Yorkshire. There’s a large family of them. Her father’s a clergyman, and Maggie’s my age. But she’s no fun – she’s one of those girls who never does anything wrong or exciting, with the type of hair that has just become fashionable by accident.’

‘Your cousin, Mademoiselle, will do very well. Could you arrange for her to sleep in your room? She would not think that a strange request?’

‘Oh, Maggie never thinks. All right, I’ll send her a telegram asking her to come on Monday.’

‘Why not tomorrow?’

‘With the bad train service on Sundays? She’ll think I’m dying if I suggest that. No, I’ll say Monday. Are you going to tell her about the awful fate hanging over me?’

‘You still make a joke of it? You have courage, I am glad to see.’

‘It gives me something else to think about, anyway,’ said Nick.

Something in her tone seemed strange and I looked at her curiously. I had a feeling that there was something she hadn’t said. We had re-entered the living room and Poirot picked up the newspaper on the sofa.

‘You read this, Mademoiselle?’ he asked.

‘No. I just opened it to see the time of the tides.’

‘I see. By the way, Mademoiselle, have you ever made a will?’

‘Yes, about six months ago. Just before my operation. For appendicitis. Someone said I ought to make a will, so I did. It made me feel quite important.’

‘And the details of that will?’

‘I left *End House* to Charles and everything else to Freddie.’

Poirot nodded. ‘I must leave. Goodbye for now, Mademoiselle. Be careful.’

‘Careful of what?’ asked Nick.

‘That is the weak point – in which direction should you be careful? Who can say? But have confidence, Mademoiselle. In a few days I will have discovered the truth.’

‘Until then be careful of poison, bombs, revolver shots, car accidents and arrows dipped in the secret poison of the South American Indians,’ finished Nick laughing.

Poirot paused as he reached the door. 'By the way,' he said. 'What price did Monsieur Lazarus offer you for the portrait of your grandfather?'

'Fifty pounds.'

'Ah!' said Poirot. He looked back at the painting above the fireplace.

'But, as I told you, I don't want to sell the old boy.'

'No,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'No, I understand.'

Chapter 4 *There Must Be Something!*

‘Poirot,’ I said, as soon as we were outside, ‘there is one thing I think you ought to know.’

‘And what is that, *mon ami*?’

I told him of Madame Rice’s version of the trouble with Nick’s car.

‘There is, of course, a type of person who tries to make themselves interesting by telling you surprising stories of things that never really happened to them! Such people will even injure themselves to make the story more credible.’

‘You don’t think that . . .’

‘That Mademoiselle Nick is of that type? No, indeed. All the same, it is interesting – what Madame Rice said. Why say it, even if it were true?’

‘I agree,’ I said. ‘But tell me, Poirot, why did you insist on getting this cousin to stay?’

‘Consider, Hastings! To find a murderer after a crime has been committed – that is simple! Or it is to someone of my ability. The murderer has, so to speak, signed his name by committing the crime. But here there is no crime – and we do not want a crime. To detect a crime before it has been committed – that is indeed difficult.

‘What is our first aim? The safety of Mademoiselle. We cannot watch over her day and night – but we can make it more difficult for our killer. We can try and make Mademoiselle more aware of the danger she faces. We can put someone into the house to watch her who could not possibly have been involved in any of the attempts to kill her. It will take a very clever man to get round those two circumstances.’ He paused, and then said

in an entirely different tone of voice, 'But what I am afraid of, Hastings, is – that he *is* a very clever man.'

'Poirot,' I said. 'You're making me feel quite nervous.'

'Me, too. Listen, my friend, the *St Loo Weekly Herald* was open at – where do you think? – a little paragraph which said, "Among the guests staying at the *Majestic Hotel* are Mr Hercule Poirot and Captain Hastings." Supposing that someone had read that paragraph. They know my name – everyone knows my name.'

'Miss Buckley didn't,' I said with a smile.

'She is a young and silly girl – she does not count. A serious man – a criminal – *would* know my name. And he would be afraid! Three times he has attempted to kill Mademoiselle and now Hercule Poirot arrives in the town. "Is that coincidence?" he would ask himself. And he would fear that it might *not* be coincidence. What would he do then?'

'Do nothing?' I suggested.

'Yes – yes, or else if he were really brave, he would make his move *quickly*!'

I looked at my old friend. 'But what makes you think that somebody else read that paragraph and not Miss Buckley?'

'When I mentioned my name it meant nothing to her. And she told us she opened the paper to look at the tides, nothing else. Well, there was nothing about tides on that page.'

'You think someone in the house . . .'

'Someone in the house, or someone who has access to it. And that is easy – the window is always open.'

'Have you any idea? Any suspicion?'

Poirot spread his arms. 'Nothing. No one seems to have any obvious reason for desiring the Little Nick's death. The house goes to the cousin – but does he want a broken-down old house

with a heavy mortgage? We must see this Charles Vyse, but the idea seems unbelievable. Then there is Madame Freddie – the best friend – with her strange eyes. What does she have to do with all this? She tells you that her friend is a liar. Why? Is she afraid of something that Nick may say? Is that something connected with the car? *Did* anyone deliberately damage it, and if so, who? And does Little Nick know who? Then there is the handsome Monsieur Lazarus. Where does he fit in? Commander Challenger . . .’

‘He’s all right,’ I interrupted quickly.

‘Oh, of course you think that, because he has been to what you English think of as “the right school”. Happily, being a foreigner, I do not think that paying a large amount of money to attend certain schools means that the people who attend them will be “all right”. They are as likely to be thieves and murderers as anyone else. I make my investigations free from ridiculous ideas like that. But, in fact, I do not see that Challenger *can* be connected.’

‘Of course he can’t,’ I said warmly.

Poirot looked at me thoughtfully.

‘You have an extraordinary effect on me, Hastings. You believe so strongly in Challenger’s complete innocence that I am almost tempted to believe in it myself! You are that completely admirable type of man, honest, honourable, willing to believe what people like Challenger tell you because they went to “the right school”. You are easily tricked, Hastings. Ah, well – I will study this Commander Challenger. You have awakened my doubts.’

‘My dear Poirot,’ I cried angrily. ‘A man who has travelled about the world like I have . . .’

‘Never learns,’ said Poirot sadly. ‘But let us not disagree, my friend. See, there ahead of us, it says Mott’s Garage.’

Poirot asked why Miss Buckley's car had crashed. The garage owner spoke quickly and technically but some facts were clear. The car *had* been deliberately damaged.

'So now we know,' said Poirot as we walked away. 'The little Nick was right. It is annoying that tomorrow is Sunday when lawyers do not work. We cannot now visit her cousin Charles till Monday. The answer to one little question might make a great difference. Because if Monsieur Charles Vyse was in his office at twelve thirty today, then he can't have fired that shot in the garden of the *Majestic Hotel*.'

'Should we examine the alibis of Nick's three friends at the hotel?'

'That is much more difficult. It would be easy enough for one of them to leave the others for a few minutes. But *mon ami*, we are not even sure that we have been introduced to all the characters in this play yet. There is the respectable Ellen and her husband – we have not met him yet. There are the Australians at the cottage. And there may be friends of Miss Buckley's whom she has not mentioned. I get the feeling, Hastings, that there is something *behind* this – something that is still a mystery. I believe Miss Buckley knows more than she told us.'

Chapter 5 Mr and Mrs Croft

There was dancing that evening at the hotel. Nick Buckley, in a bright-red dress, waved to us. Frederica Rice, in white, danced with an exhaustion that was the opposite of Nick's energy.

'She is very beautiful,' said Poirot.

'Who? Our Nick?'

'No – the other. Is she evil? Is she good? Is she simply unhappy? I cannot tell,' he said unhappily.

Later, he stood up. Mrs Rice was now alone at her table. I followed him over to her.

'May I join you?' He laid a hand on the back of a chair, then sat on it when she nodded her head. 'Madame, I do not know whether your friend has told you. Today someone tried to kill her.'

Her extraordinary eyes with their huge black pupils opened wider.

'What do you mean?'

'Mademoiselle Buckley was shot at in the garden of this hotel.' She smiled. 'Did Nick tell you so?'

'No, Madame, I saw it with my own eyes. Here is the bullet.' He held it out to her and she sat back in shock. 'It is no fantasy of Mademoiselle's imagination, you understand. And there is more. Several very strange accidents have happened in the last few days. You will have heard – no, perhaps you have not. You only arrived yesterday, did you not?'

'Yes – yesterday.'

'Before that you were staying with friends, I understand. At Tavistock. I wonder, Madame, what were the names of the friends with whom you were staying?'

'Is there any reason why I should tell you that?' she asked coldly.

Poirot, with an innocent expression, apologised. 'A thousand pardons, Madame. But I myself have friends at Tavistock and thought that you might have met them there . . . Buchanan – that is the name of my friends.'

Mrs Rice shook her head. 'I don't think I have met them.' Her tone was pleasant now. 'Tell me more about Nick. Who shot at her? Why?'

'I do not know who – as *yet*,' said Poirot. 'But I will find out. I am, you know, a detective. Hercule Poirot is my name.'

'A very famous name,' she said surprising us both. 'What do you want me to do?'

'I will ask you, Madame, to look after your friend.'

'I will.'

'That is all.' He got up, made a quick bow, and we returned to our own table.

'Poirot,' I said, 'aren't you giving too much information away?'

'*Mon ami*, what else can I do? It's the safest thing to do. I can take no chances. And one thing is becoming clear: Madame Rice was not at Tavistock. Where was she?'

★ ★ ★

The following day, Sunday, about half past eleven, Poirot said, 'Come, my friend. Monsieur Lazarus and Madame Rice have gone out in his car and Mademoiselle with them.'

We walked down the terrace steps and across a short area of grass to a small gate with a sign that said '*End House. Private.*' In another minute we were on the lawn at the back of the house. There was no one there. The terrace windows were open and we went into the living room and then up to Nick's bedroom.

‘You see, my friend,’ said Poirot, ‘how easy it is. No one has seen us come. No one will see us go. And if anyone did see us, we would have an excellent excuse for being there – if we were known to be friends of Nick’s who come and go as they please.’

‘You mean that the would-be murderer can’t be a stranger?’

‘That is exactly what I mean, Hastings.’

He turned to leave the room and I followed him. And then we stopped abruptly. A man was coming up the stairs. ‘What are you doing here?’ he demanded.

‘Ah!’ said Poirot. ‘Monsieur – Croft, I think?’

‘That’s my name, but what . . .’

‘We will go into the living room to talk. It would be better, I think.’

In the living-room, with the door shut, Poirot made a little bow. ‘I will introduce myself. Hercule Poirot at your service.’

‘Oh! The detective. I’ve read about you. French, aren’t you?’

‘Belgian. This is my friend, Captain Hastings.’

‘Glad to meet you. But look, what are you doing here? Is anything wrong?’

‘It depends what you call – wrong.’

The Australian nodded. ‘I came round to bring little Miss Buckley some vegetables from my garden. I came in, as usual, through the window and put the basket down. I was just going off again when I heard men’s voices upstairs and I thought I’d make sure everything was all right. And now you tell me you’re a detective. What’s it all about?’

‘It is very simple,’ said Poirot. ‘The other night a picture fell from above Mademoiselle’s bed. I promised to bring her some special cord. She said she was going out this morning, but that I could come and measure how much was needed. There – it is simple.’ He smiled.

‘Didn’t I see you yesterday?’ said Croft slowly. ‘You passed our cottage.’

‘Ah! Yes, you were in the garden,’ replied Poirot.

‘That’s right. Mr Poirot, I wish you’d come to the cottage with me now – have a cup of morning tea, Australian style, and meet my wife. She’s read all about you.’

‘Monsieur Croft, we will be delighted.’

Croft told us of his home near Melbourne, of his early life, of his meeting with his wife, of his success. ‘We decided to travel,’ he said. ‘We came down to this part of the world to try and find some of my wife’s relatives – but we couldn’t find any of them. Then we took a trip to Europe and while we were in Italy we were in a train accident. My poor wife was badly hurt but the doctors all say she’ll recover with time – time and rest. So she wanted to come down here and by good luck we found this place. Nice and quiet with no cars passing, or noisy neighbours.’

With his last words we had come to the cottage. He called to his wife who answered him.

Mrs Croft lay on a sofa. She was middle aged, with pretty grey hair and a kind smile.

‘Who do you think this is, my dear?’ said Mr Croft. ‘It’s the world-famous detective, Mr Hercule Poirot. I brought him to have a chat with you.’

‘How exciting!’ cried Mrs Croft, shaking Poirot by the hand. ‘I read about that Blue Train business, and a lot about your other cases. Since this trouble with my back, I’ve read all of the detective stories ever written, I think. Are you staying down here, Mr Poirot?’

‘Yes, Madame, I am taking a holiday.’

‘Are you sure you’re not down here on work and just pretending it’s a holiday?’ asked Mr Croft.

'You mustn't ask him embarrassing questions, Bert,' said Mrs Croft.

'What happened with the picture was a terrible thing,' said Mr Croft.

'That poor girl might've been killed,' said Mrs Croft. 'She brings a bit of life to the place when she's up here. Not very popular with the neighbours, but the English don't like that sort of energy in a girl. And that cousin of hers has no chance of persuading her to settle down here for good!'

'Don't talk about people like that, Milly,' said her husband.

'Aha!' said Poirot. 'So Charles Vyse is in love with our little friend?'

'Very much so,' said Mrs Croft. 'But I'd like her to marry that nice sailor – Challenger. I've got my reasons for being interested in that girl, haven't I, Bert?'

Mr Croft stood up from his chair quickly.

'No need to talk about that, Milly,' he said. 'I wonder, Mr Poirot, if you'd like to see some photographs of Australia while we have some tea?'

'Nice people,' I said when we left. 'So simple and friendly. Typical Australians.'

'They were, perhaps, just a bit too typical,' said Poirot, thoughtfully.

'What a suspicious old devil you are!'

'You are right, *mon ami*. I am suspicious of everyone – of everything. I am afraid, Hastings – afraid.'

Chapter 6 *A Call Upon Mr Vyse*

On Monday morning Miss Buckley came to see us. She smiled, but I thought that she looked even more tired than before. She held a telegram, which she handed to Poirot. 'There,' she said, 'I hope that will please you!'

Poirot read it aloud. 'Arrive 5.30 today. Maggie.'

Nick took off her hat and said: 'Oh, well, it's all great fun, isn't it?'

'Is it, Mademoiselle?' asked Poirot gently.

She tried to control her sudden tears. 'No,' she said. 'It – it isn't, really. I'm afraid – terribly afraid. And I always thought I was brave.'

'You are, my child, you are. Both Hastings and I, we admire your courage.'

'Yes, indeed,' I added warmly.

'No,' said Nick, shaking her head. 'I'm not brave. It's – it's the waiting. Wondering if anything's going to happen. And *how* it will happen! This morning, I simply *couldn't* come through the garden. I feel as if my bravery has gone all of a sudden. It's this thing coming on top of everything else.'

'What do you mean, Mademoiselle? "On top of everything else"?''

There was a small pause before she replied, 'I don't mean anything in particular. It's just what the newspapers call "the strain of modern life"'. She sat in a chair, and when she spoke again, it was in a dreamy voice. 'I love *End House*. I've always wanted to put on a play there. It's got an atmosphere of drama about it. And now I feel as if a drama is being acted there. Only I'm right in it! I am, perhaps, the person who – dies in the first act.' Her voice shook.

‘Now, now, Mademoiselle.’ Poirot’s voice was cheerful. ‘This will not do. This is hysteria.’

She looked at him sharply. ‘Did Freddie tell you I was hysterical? You mustn’t always believe what Freddie says. There are times, you know, when – when she acts strangely.’

There was a pause, then Poirot asked what seemed to be a totally irrelevant question: ‘Tell me, Mademoiselle has anyone ever offered to buy *End House*?’

‘No.’

‘Would you consider selling it?’

‘No – well, unless it was such a huge amount of money that it would be foolish not to. I don’t want to sell it, though, because I’m very fond of it.’

‘I understand.’

Nick got up and moved slowly towards the door. ‘By the way, there are fireworks down at the harbour tonight. Will you come up for dinner at eight o’clock? The fireworks begin at nine thirty. You will see them really well from the garden.’

‘Many thanks,’ I said.

‘There is nothing like a party for making you feel better,’ said Nick and with a little laugh she went out.

‘Poor child,’ said Poirot. He reached for his hat.

‘Are we going out?’ I asked.

‘Of course – we have legal business to deal with, *mon ami*.’

‘Oh, of course. I understand.’

‘Someone with your brilliant mind could not fail to do so, Hastings.’

★ ★ ★

Mr Charles Vyse was a tall, pale young man. Poirot said that he had some questions on a legal matter and wanted Mr Vyse’s advice.

‘I am very grateful,’ said Poirot when Mr Vyse had given that advice for the legal matter Poirot had invented. ‘As a foreigner, you understand, I do not understand English law.’

It was then that Mr Vyse asked who had sent Poirot to him.

‘Miss Buckley,’ said Poirot. ‘I tried to see you on Saturday morning – about half past twelve – but you were out.’

‘Yes, I left early on Saturday.’

‘Tell me, Monsieur Vyse, is there any chance that Miss Buckley will sell *End House*?’

‘No. My cousin has a great love for the house. Nothing would make Nick sell it.’

A few minutes later we were out in the street again.

‘Well, my friend,’ said Poirot. ‘Would you have described Mademoiselle Buckley’s attitude towards *End House* as one of “great love”?’

‘In no way,’ I said.

‘So one of the two is lying,’ said Poirot, thoughtfully. ‘And he was not in his office at half past twelve on Saturday.’

Chapter 7 Tragedy

The first person we saw when we arrived at *End House* that evening was Nick. She was dancing about the hall, wearing silk pyjamas.

‘I’m waiting for my dress to arrive. The shop promised faithfully that it would get here in time!’

‘Ah! There is a dance later tonight, is there not?’ said Poirot.

‘Yes. We’re all going on to it after the fireworks. That is, I suppose we are.’ There was a sudden change in her voice. But the next minute she was laughing. ‘Never give in! That’s what I say. Don’t think of trouble and trouble won’t come!’ She was laughing. ‘I’ve got my bravery back tonight. I’m going to be happy and enjoy myself.’

There was a sound on the stairs. Nick turned. ‘Oh! There’s Maggie. Maggie, here are the detectives who are protecting me from the would-be killer. Take them into the living-room and they will tell you all about it.’

We shook hands with Maggie Buckley, a quiet girl, pretty in an old-fashioned way. She wore a simple, well-worn, black evening dress and had honest blue eyes. ‘Nick has been telling me the most amazing things,’ she said. ‘Surely she must be exaggerating?’

‘Miss Buckley, it is the truth,’ said Poirot quietly.

‘Your cousin is very brave,’ I said. ‘She insists on behaving as usual.’

‘It’s the only way, isn’t it?’ said Maggie. ‘I mean, whatever one’s feelings are, it’s no good complaining about them. That only makes everyone else uncomfortable.’ She added in a soft voice, ‘I’m very fond of Nick. She’s always been good to me.’

We could say nothing more for at that moment Frederica Rice came into the room. She was wearing a long pale-blue dress and looked very delicate. Lazarus followed her and then Nick danced in. She was now wearing a black dress and a beautiful old Chinese shawl in a deep, glowing red.

'Hello, people,' she said. 'Who wants cocktails?'

'That's a wonderful and unusual shawl, Nick,' Lazarus said.

'It's warm,' said Nick. 'It'll be nice when we're watching the fireworks. And it's bright. I – I hate black.'

'Yes,' said Frederica. 'I've never seen you in a black dress before, Nick. Why did you get it?'

'Oh! I don't know.' I saw an expression of pain cross her face for a second. 'Why does one do anything?'

We went in to dinner. The food was not good. The champagne, on the other hand, was excellent.

'George hasn't turned up,' said Nick. 'He had to go back to Plymouth last night. He'll get here in time for the dance.'

A faint roaring sound came in through the window.

'Oh, that speedboat!' said Lazarus. 'I get so tired of hearing it.'

'That's not the speedboat,' said Nick. 'That's a seaplane.'

'I believe you're right. I admire all these flying people,' said Lazarus. 'If Michael Seton had succeeded in his flight round the world, he'd have been such a hero. How tragic that he's crashed somewhere.'

'He may still be all right,' said Nick.

'I doubt it. It's a thousand to one against by now. Poor Mad Seton.'

'They always called him Mad Seton, didn't they?' asked Frederica.

Lazarus nodded. 'He comes from a mad family,' he said. 'His uncle, Sir Matthew Seton, who died a week ago – he was mad. He was a great woman-hater.'

‘Why do you say Michael Seton is dead?’ asked Nick. ‘I don’t see any reason for giving up hope – yet.’

‘Of course, you knew him, didn’t you?’ said Lazarus.

‘Freddie and I met him at Le Touquet last year,’ said Nick. ‘He was lovely, wasn’t he, Freddie?’

‘Don’t ask me, darling. He was your friend not mine. He took you up in his plane once, didn’t he?’

‘Yes, it was wonderful.’

Suddenly Nick jumped up. ‘I hear the telephone. Don’t wait for me. Finish your meal. It’s getting late. And I’ve asked lots of people to come for the fireworks.’ She left the room. I looked at my watch. It was just nine o’clock. It was twenty past nine when Nick reappeared, putting her head round the door. ‘Come on – everyone else is in the living room!’

We stood up obediently. About a dozen people had been asked – among them Charles Vyse. We all moved out into the garden and the first firework flew into the sky. At that moment I heard a loud familiar voice, and turned my head to see Nick welcoming Mr Croft.

‘What a pity that Mrs Croft can’t be here too. We ought to have carried her up,’ said Nick.

‘She never complains – that woman’s got the sweetest nature. Oh! That’s a good one,’ said Mr Croft as a shower of golden stars lit up the sky.

The night was a dark one – there was no moon – and it was also cool. Maggie Buckley shivered. ‘I’ll just run in and get a coat,’ she said quietly. As she turned towards the house, Frederica Rice called, ‘Oh, Maggie, get mine too. It’s in my room.’

‘She didn’t hear,’ said Nick. ‘I’ll get it, Freddie. I want my fur one – this shawl isn’t nearly warm enough.’

Bang! A shower of green stars filled the sky. They changed to blue, then red, then silver. Another and yet another.

““Oh!” and then “Ah!” that is what one says,’ observed Poirot. ‘It becomes boring, do you not find? And it is cold and the grass is damp to the feet!’ Poirot lifted first one, then the other foot from the ground with a cat-like movement. ‘It is the dampness of the feet I fear. I will sit in the house.’

We went towards the house. Loud shouts of excitement came up to us from the harbour below.

‘We are all children really,’ said Poirot, thoughtfully. ‘The fireworks, the party, the games with balls, and even the magician, the man who deceives the eye, however carefully one watches – what is it, Hastings?’

I had caught him by the arm with one hand, while with the other I pointed. Between us and the open terrace window, a figure lay motionless on the grass, wearing a red Chinese shawl.

‘No!’ whispered Poirot. ‘No . . .’

Chapter 8 *The Fatal Shawl*

I don't think we stood there for more than forty seconds, frozen with horror, but it seemed like an hour. Then Poirot knelt down by the body. And at that moment we received a second shock. For a voice called out happily, and a moment later Nick appeared at the open window, the lighted room behind her. 'Sorry I've been so long, Maggie,' she said. 'But . . .'

Then she stopped – staring at the scene before her. With an exclamation, Poirot turned over the body and I looked down into the dead face of Maggie Buckley . . .

★ ★ ★

On Poirot's orders I took Nick, who was in shock, into the living room and laid her on the sofa, then I hurried out into the hall in search of the telephone. I almost ran into Ellen who was standing there with a strange expression on her face.

'Has – has anything happened, Sir?

'Yes,' I said. 'Where's the telephone? Somebody's hurt. Miss Buckley. Miss Maggie Buckley.'

'Miss *Maggie*? Are you sure, Sir – sure that it's Miss Maggie?'

'I'm quite sure,' I said. 'Why?'

'Oh, nothing. I – I thought it might be Mrs Rice.'

'Look here,' I said urgently. 'Where's the telephone?'

'It's in the little room here, Sir.' She opened the door and pointed to the phone.

'Thanks,' I said.

'If you want Dr Graham . . .'

'No, no,' I said. 'That's all. Go, please.'

She left as slowly as she dared. I got the police station and made my report. Then I rang up the doctor Ellen had mentioned – I

found his number in the phonebook. It seemed to me that Nick might need medical attention – even though a doctor could do nothing for that poor girl lying outside.

It seemed hours later that the living-room door opened and Poirot and a police inspector came in. With them came a man carrying a medical bag who was obviously Dr Graham. He came over at once to Nick. ‘And how are you feeling, Miss Buckley? This must have been a terrible shock.’ His fingers were on her wrist.

‘Not too bad.’

He turned to me. ‘Has she had anything to drink?’

‘Some brandy,’ I said.

The police inspector moved forward and Nick greeted him with a tiny smile. ‘Not speeding this time,’ she said.

They obviously knew one another!

‘This is a terrible business, Miss Buckley,’ said the inspector. ‘I’m truly sorry about it. Now Mr Poirot here, whose name I’m very familiar with (and proud we are to have him with us), tells me that you were shot at in the gardens of the *Majestic Hotel* the other morning?’

Nick nodded.

‘And you’d had some strange accidents before that?’

‘Yes.’ She gave a short explanation of the various ‘accidents’.

‘Now, why was your cousin wearing your shawl tonight?’

‘We came in to get our coats and I left the shawl on the sofa here. Then I went upstairs and put on the coat I’m wearing now. I also got a coat for my friend Mrs Rice – there it is on the floor by the window. Then Maggie called that she couldn’t find her coat in the hall and she’d take my shawl. Because she really didn’t feel it was *very* cold – where she comes from it’s a lot colder!’

She just wanted *something*. And I said all right, and when I came out . . .' She stopped, her voice breaking.

'Now, don't upset yourself, Miss Buckley. Just tell me this. Did you hear one shot – or two?'

Nick shook her head. 'No, I only heard the fireworks.'

'That's just it,' said the inspector. 'You'd never notice a shot with that noise. Well, I won't need to ask you any more questions tonight, Miss. I'm more sorry about this than I can say.'

Dr Graham moved forward. 'I'm going to suggest, Miss Buckley, that you don't stay here. I've been talking with Monsieur Poirot. I know of an excellent nursing home. You've had a shock, you know. What you need is complete rest.'

Nick looked at Poirot. 'Is it – really because of the shock?' she asked.

He nodded. 'I want you to feel safe, my child. And I want to feel that you are safe. You understand?'

'Yes,' said Nick, 'but I'm not afraid any longer. I don't care any more. If anyone wants to murder me, they can. I have nothing to live for—now. You don't know. None of you know!'

'I really think Monsieur Poirot's plan is a good one,' the doctor said gently. 'I will take you in my car and we will give you something to make sure you have a good night's rest. Now what do you say?'

'I don't mind,' said Nick. 'Anything you like. It doesn't matter . . .'

Chapter 9 *A. to J.*

I will never forget the night that followed. Poirot walked up and down our sitting room at the hotel, accusing himself of failure. 'This is the result of having too good an opinion of oneself! I am punished – yes, I am punished. I, Hercule Poirot. I was too confident. And the murderer may still kill Miss Nick Buckley. The position is changed – for the worse. It may mean that not one life – but two will be lost.'

'Not while you're here,' I said firmly.

He stopped and took my hand. 'Thank you, *mon ami*! Thank you! You put new courage into me. Hercule Poirot will not fail again. No one else will die. Somewhere there has been a lack of order and method in my usually well-arranged ideas. I will start again. Yes, I will start at the beginning. And this time I will not fail.'

'You really think that Nick Buckley's life is still in danger?'

'My friend, for what other reason did I send her to this nursing home? It is for safety only. The doctor agrees. No one, not even her dearest friend, will be admitted to see Miss Buckley. You and I are the only ones permitted. And our task now is a much simpler one – because the murderer has signed his name to the crime and I am more than ever convinced that the murderer is someone Mademoiselle knows.'

'But last night we were all together!'

'Could you be completely sure, Hastings, that you saw all of the people at *End House* all of the time last night?'

'No,' I said slowly.

Poirot nodded his head. 'Exactly. It would take only a few minutes. The two girls go to the house. The murderer walks quietly away and hides behind that large tree in the middle of the

grass. Nick Buckley comes out of the window and he fires three shots one after the other . . .’

‘Three?’ I questioned.

‘Yes. He was taking no chances.’

‘Do you think – do you think he realized that he’d killed the wrong person?’

‘I am quite sure he did not,’ said Poirot. ‘Yes, that must have been an unpleasant surprise for him.’

I remembered the strange attitude of the maid, Ellen, and told Poirot about it.

‘That is interesting. Could it be she who . . .?’ He broke off. ‘Motive! We must find the motive!’ He was silent for a time. When he spoke again, his voice was calm.

‘*Motive!*’ he said. ‘This is deliberate murder. What are the motives for a murder such as that?’

‘There is, first, gain. Well, Charles Vyse inherits a house that is probably not worth inheriting. Madame Rice would inherit only a very small amount.

‘What is another motive? Hate – or love that has turned to hate. Well, Madame Croft says that both Charles Vyse and Commander Challenger are in love with the young lady. Now, would Charles Vyse kill his cousin rather than let her become the wife of another man? I would never suspect Commander Challenger of murder for emotional reasons. No, no, he is not the type. But with Charles Vyse – it is possible. But it does not satisfy me.

‘Another motive – jealousy. But who has reason to be jealous of Mademoiselle? Another woman? There is only Madame Rice, but there may be something there.

‘Lastly – fear. Does Mademoiselle Nick know somebody’s secret? If so, I do not think that she realizes it herself. But that

might be it. And if so, it makes it very difficult. Because even if she holds the clue, she will be unable to tell us what it is.'

He sat down at the desk and began to write on a piece of paper. 'I am making a list of people around Mademoiselle Buckley. In that list, if I am correct, there must be the name of the murderer.'

He continued to write for perhaps twenty minutes – then pushed the paper across to me. On it he had written:

Suspect A is the housekeeper, Ellen. Her attitude and words on hearing of the crime are suspicious. She had the best opportunity of anyone to have organized the accidents and to have known of the pistol, but she is unlikely to have damaged the car, and the intelligence needed to commit the crime seems above her level. There is no obvious motive for her to kill Nick but we should investigate her past.

Suspect B is Ellen's husband. He had the same opportunity as Ellen and could have known about the gun. He is more likely to have damaged the car. However, he has no obvious motive and lacks intelligence. He should be interviewed and investigated.

Suspect C is their son and it couldn't be him. However, he should be interviewed as he might give valuable information.

Suspect D is Mr Croft. The only suspicious circumstance attached to him is the fact that we met him coming up the stairs to the bedroom floor. Nothing is known of his past, but he has no motive.

Suspect E is Mrs Croft and there are no suspicious circumstances attached to her, either, and no motive.

Suspect F is Mrs Rice. She asked Nick to get her coat and says Nick is a liar. She wasn't at Tavistock when the accidents happened. But where was she? Her motive? Gain – but there is very little to inherit from Nick. Could she be jealous of Nick? That is possible, but there is nothing known. Or fear? That is also possible, but again there is nothing known. We must talk to Nick and see if there is anything. Maybe something to do with her marriage?

Suspect G is Mr Lazarus. He had a general opportunity to organize the accidents and he offered to buy the grandfather's picture. He agreed with FR that the car brakes were all right and he may have been in the area before Friday. He appears to have no motive unless, perhaps, he could make a good profit on

the picture. We must find out where he was before arriving at St Loo and also find out the financial position of *Aaron Lazarus & Son*.

Suspect H is Commander Challenger. There are no suspicious circumstances as far as he is concerned. He was around all last week, so he had good opportunities for arranging the accidents. He arrived half an hour after the murder and I can see no motive for him.

Suspect I is Mr Vyse. He was out of his office at the time when the shot was fired in the garden of the hotel, so his opportunity was good. His statement about Nick's love of *End House* seems questionable and he would probably know about the pistol. Gain would be a very slight motive but love or hate is possible. We must find out which bank or company has the mortgage on *End House* and investigate the financial position of Vyse's firm.

Suspect J is simply a possibility, someone we do not know who has a link to one of the people above. The existence of J would (1) make clear why Ellen was not surprised by the crime; (2) explain why Croft and his wife came to live in the cottage; (3) might supply a motive for Mrs Rice's jealousy or fear of a secret being revealed.

‘What an excellent piece of work,’ I said, warmly. ‘Now we can see all the possibilities most clearly.’

‘Yes,’ he said, thoughtfully. ‘And one name seems especially significant, my friend. *Charles Vyse*. He has the best opportunities. We have given him the choice of two motives. There is only one thing that is against it. The boldness of the crime! That has been clear from the first. That’s why, as I say, the motive cannot be obvious.’ Suddenly he threw the paper on the floor. ‘No,’ he said, as I protested. ‘That list is useless. Still, it has cleared my mind. *Order and method!* That is the first stage. To arrange the facts. The next stage is that of the psychology. The correct use of the little grey cells! Hastings, go to bed.’

‘No,’ I said, ‘not unless you do. I’m not going to leave you.’

‘Most faithful friend! But sit in the comfortable chair.’

I accepted his offer. And the last thing I remember was seeing Poirot carefully picking up the list from the floor and putting it tidily in the wastepaper basket.

Chapter 10 Nick's Secret

It was daylight when I woke up. Poirot was sitting at the desk, and his eyes were shining with that strange cat-like green light that I knew so well.

'Poirot,' I cried. 'You have thought of something.'

He nodded. 'Tell me, Hastings, the answer to these three questions. *Why has Mademoiselle Nick been sleeping badly lately? Why did she buy a black evening dress – she never wears black? Why did she say "I have nothing to live for – now"?*' We have a psychological change. What made her change?'

'The shock of her cousin's death?'

'I wonder. Is there any other possible reason? Think, Hastings. Use your little grey cells. When was the last moment we had the opportunity of observing her closely?'

'Well, at dinner.'

'Exactly. What happened at the end of dinner, Hastings?'

'She went to the telephone,' I said slowly.

'You have got there at last. She went to the telephone. And she was absent for twenty minutes at least. Who spoke to her? What did they say? We have to find out, Hastings. For there, I believe, we will find the clue we need.'

★ ★ ★

When I arrived at the breakfast table later I read the newspaper, but there was little news apart from the confirmation of the death of the airman, Michael Seton. I had just finished breakfast when Frederica Rice came up to me. 'I want to see Monsieur Poirot, Captain Hastings. Is he up yet, do you know?'

'I will take you with me now,' I said.

‘Monsieur Poirot’, she said when she sat down. ‘I suppose there is no doubt that Nick was the one he really wanted to kill last night?’

‘No doubt at all.’

Frederica frowned. ‘Until last night I never dreamed that the danger was – serious. I see now that everything will have to be investigated – carefully. Am I right, Monsieur Poirot?’

‘You are very intelligent, Madame.’

‘As you obviously suspected, Monsieur Poirot, I was not at Tavistock. Mr Lazarus and I drove down early last week and stayed at a little place called Shellacombe.’

‘How long have you and Monsieur Lazarus been friends?’

‘I met him six months ago.’

‘And you – have feelings for him, Madame?’

‘He is – rich.’

‘Oh!’ cried Poirot. ‘That is an ugly thing to say.’

She seemed amused. ‘Isn’t it better to say it myself – than to wait for you to say it?’

‘May I repeat, Madame, that you are *very* intelligent.’

‘You will give me a diploma soon,’ said Frederica and stood up.

‘There is nothing more you wish to tell me, Madame?’

‘I do not think so – no. I am going to take some flowers round to Nick.’

‘Ah, that is very kind of you. Thank you, Madame, for telling me the truth.’

She seemed about to speak, then decided not to and went out of the room, smiling slightly.

‘She is intelligent,’ said Poirot. ‘Yes, but so is Hercule Poirot! And to speak so openly of how rich Monsieur Lazarus is . . .’

‘I found that disgusting.’

'*Mon ami*, it is not about disgust. If Madame Rice has a kind friend who is rich and can give her all she needs – she would not need to murder her dearest friend for almost nothing.'

'Oh!' I said.

'Indeed! "Oh!"'

'Why didn't you stop her going to the nursing home?'

'Why should I give away what I know? It is not Hercule Poirot who stops Mademoiselle Nick from seeing her friends – it is the doctors and the nurses.'

'You're not afraid that they'll let her in?'

'Nobody will be let in, my dear Hastings, except you and me. We must go there now.'

'And ask for the answers to our three questions?'

'We will ask. Though I already know the answer to the main one.'

'What?' I exclaimed. 'But when did you find out?'

'When I was eating my breakfast, Hastings. It became obvious. I will leave you to hear it from Mademoiselle.'

★ ★ ★

We found Nick in a bright sunny room. She looked like a tired child and her eyes were red. 'It's good of you to come,' she said in a flat voice.

Poirot took her hand in both of his. '*Courage*, Mademoiselle. There is always something to live for.'

The words surprised her. She looked up in his face. 'Oh!' she said. 'Oh!'

'May I offer you, Mademoiselle, my very deepest sympathy?'

Her face went red. 'So you know. Oh, well, it doesn't matter who knows now. Now that I will never, never see him . . .' Her voice broke.

'Courage, Mademoiselle!'

'I haven't got any courage left. I've used it all up in these last few weeks, hoping against hope.'

I could not understand one word she was saying.

'Look at the poor Hastings,' said Poirot. 'He does not know what we are talking about.'

Her unhappy eyes met mine. 'Michael Seton, the airman,' she said. 'I was engaged to him – and he's dead.'

Chapter 11 *The Motive*

I was very surprised. 'Is this what you meant, Poirot?'

'Yes, *mon ami*. This morning I saw the news of Seton's death on the front page of the newspaper. I remembered the conversation at dinner last night – and I saw everything.'

He turned to Nick. 'You heard the news last night?'

'Yes. On the radio. I made an excuse about hearing the telephone. I wanted to listen to the evening news alone – in case . . . And I heard it . . .'

'I know, I know.' He took her hand in both of his.

'It was terrible. It felt like a dream. On the outside I was behaving as usual. And then, when I went to get the coats – I started to cry for a minute, but Maggie called up about her coat. And then she took my shawl and went out, and I put on some make-up and followed her. And there she was – dead . . .'

'Yes, yes, it must have been a terrible shock.'

'No! I was angry! I wished it had been me! There I was – alive! And Michael dead, far away in the Pacific.'

'Poor child! But it passes – sadness passes.'

'You think I'll forget – and marry someone else? Never!' She looked lovely as she sat up in bed, her cheeks burning with anger and sadness.

Poirot said gently, 'No, no. I am not thinking anything like that. You are very lucky, Mademoiselle. You have been loved by a brave man – a hero. How did you meet him?'

'It was at Le Touquet – last September.'

'And you became engaged – when?'

'Just after Christmas. But it had to be a secret. Michael's uncle – Sir Matthew Seton – thought women ruined a man's life. And it was Sir Matthew who paid for Michael's seaplane and

the round the world flight. If Michael had succeeded – well, he could have asked his uncle for anything. I never told anyone – not even Freddie, though she might have suspected . . . I said something to one person. But I don't know how much he – the person – understood.'

Poirot nodded. 'Do you get on well with your cousin Monsieur Vyse?'

'Charles? Charles doesn't approve of my drinking, my friends or my conversation. But he still loves me. Who have you been talking to, to get the local gossip?'

'I had a little conversation with the Australian lady, Madame Croft.'

'She's very sweet. Very sentimental – love and home and children – you know the sort of thing.'

'I am old-fashioned and sentimental myself, Mademoiselle. Now, we have plans to make. To begin with, you will stay here. You will do what I tell you. You will see no friends.'

Nick looked exhausted. 'I'll do anything you like. I don't care what I do.'

'You once mentioned a will you made. Where is it?'

'Oh! Somewhere at *End House*.' She frowned. 'I'm very untidy, you know. It might be in the writing-table in the library. Or in my bedroom.'

'You permit me to search – yes?'

'If you want to – yes. Look at anything you like.'

Chapter 12 Ellen

Poirot said nothing till we were outside.

‘You see, Hastings? This gives us what we have been looking for – the motive!’

‘Do you mean jealousy?’

‘Jealousy? No, no, my friend. The usual motive – money, my friend, money! Listen, *mon ami*. Just over a week ago Sir Matthew Seton, one of the richest men in England, dies. He has a nephew who will inherit his huge fortune. Last Tuesday, Michael Seton is reported missing – and on Wednesday the attacks on Mademoiselle’s life begin. Suppose, Hastings, that Michael Seton made a will before he started on his flight, and left all he had to his fiancée?’

‘But nobody knew of the engagement,’ I said.

‘Pah! Somebody *always* knows. If not, they guess. Madame Rice suspected. Mademoiselle Nick said so. She may have discovered something.’

‘How?’

‘Well, there must have been letters from Michael Seton to Mademoiselle Nick. Madame Rice may have seen them.’

‘And she would know about the will that Nick had made?’

‘Yes. Oh, it is getting simpler now. I remove the servants from my list of suspects. I remove Commander Challenger; I remove Monsieur Lazarus; I remove the Australians. I keep just two people on my list.’

‘One is Frederica Rice,’ I said slowly.

I had a vision of her white, delicate face, the golden hair . . .

‘Yes. If Mademoiselle Nick had been shot last night, Madame Rice would be a rich woman today. However, there is another suspect. Charles Vyse.’

‘But he only inherits the house.’

‘He may not know that. He may believe that she has never made a will and that he will inherit because he is her nearest living relative. It is more likely that he knew about the pistol than Madame and how to use one.’

‘And to send the rock crashing down the cliff.’

‘Perhaps. Though a lever can help a lot if you are not strong. As to the car, many women are as good mechanics as men. However, Charles Vyse is less likely to have known of the engagement than Madame. And the action was very sudden. Until last night no one knew for certain that Seton was dead. To act without knowing seems very unlike someone with a legal mind.’

We had now gone through the little gate into the gardens of *End House* and had come out on the lawn which a man was cutting with a machine. He had a long, stupid-looking face and beside him was a boy of about ten, ugly but clearly intelligent.

‘Good morning,’ said Poirot. ‘You are the gardener, the husband of Madame Ellen who works in the house?’

‘He’s my dad,’ said the boy.

‘That’s right, Sir,’ said the man. ‘You are the foreign gentleman that’s really a detective?’

We went into the house. Ellen showed no surprise at seeing us. Poirot explained that we were here to make a search of the house.

‘Very good, Sir.’

‘Were you very surprised last night when you heard Miss Buckley had been shot?’ Poirot asked her.

‘Yes, Sir. Miss Maggie was a nice young lady, Sir. I can’t imagine anyone wanting to kill her.’

‘If it had been anyone else, you would not have been so surprised – eh?’

She looked at him, then seemed to decide to trust him.

‘Sir,’ she said, ‘this isn’t a good house.’

‘You have been here long?’ Poirot asked.

‘I’ve been here for six years, Sir. But I was here as a girl. I was a kitchen maid in the time of old Sir Nicholas.’

Poirot looked at her. ‘In an old house,’ he said, ‘there is sometimes an atmosphere of evil.’

‘That’s it, Sir,’ said Ellen, quickly. ‘*Evil*. And evil never goes away. I always knew something bad would happen in this house, some day.’

‘But you didn’t think it would happen to Miss Maggie.’

‘No, indeed, Sir. Nobody hated *her* – I’m sure of it.’

‘You didn’t hear the shots?’

‘Not with the fireworks. They were very noisy.’

‘You weren’t out watching them?’

‘No, I hadn’t finished clearing up dinner. And there’s two nights of them. William and I get the evening off tomorrow and we’ll go down into the town and see them from there.’

‘I understand. And you heard Mademoiselle Maggie asking for her coat?’

‘I heard Miss Nick run upstairs, Sir, and Miss Maggie call up from the front hall saying she couldn’t find something and then I heard her say, “All right – I’ll take the shawl.”’

‘You did not search for the coat for her – or get it from the car where we discovered it had been left?’

‘I had my work to do, Sir.’

‘And neither of the young ladies asked you because they thought you were out looking at the fireworks?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘However, in other years, you *have* been out watching the fireworks?’

‘I don’t know what you mean, Sir. We’re always allowed to watch the fireworks from the garden. If I didn’t feel like it this year and wanted to get on with my work and go to bed, well, that’s my business.’

‘I am sorry; I did not intend to offend you. Now one more question. This is an old house. Are there any secret hiding places in it?’

‘Well, there’s a sliding panel in this room: I remember seeing it as a girl. Only I can’t remember where it is. Or was it in the library? I’m not sure . . .’

‘Big enough for a person to hide in?’

‘Oh, no, Sir! Just a little cupboard, nothing more than that.’

Chapter 13 Letters

When Ellen left the room, Poirot looked thoughtful.

‘Why were you asking about a secret hiding place?’ I said.

‘I had an idea, Hastings. What if J, the stranger I put on the suspects list, really exists? Suppose, for some reason connected with Ellen, that J. comes to the house last night. He conceals himself in a secret hiding place in this room. A girl passes through that he thinks is Nick. He follows her out – and shoots her. However, now we know that there is no hiding place and that Ellen decided to remain in the kitchen last night by pure chance. Come, let us search for the will of Mademoiselle Nick.’

In the library there was a large old-fashioned writing table. In it and on it bills and receipts were mixed up together. There were letters of invitation, letters asking for accounts to be paid, letters from friends.

‘We will arrange these papers’, said Poirot sternly, ‘with order and method.’

Half an hour later, he sat back with a pleased look on his face. The writing table was all tidy. ‘One thing is good at least,’ he said. ‘We have gone through everything so carefully that there is no possibility that we have missed anything.’

‘I agree. Not that we have found much.’

‘Except possibly this.’ Poirot threw across a letter. It was in large untidy handwriting.

‘Darling,

Party was marvellous. You were wise not to touch that stuff – it’s too hard to give up. I’m writing to the boyfriend to send more quickly.

Yours,

FREDDIE.’

‘Dated last February,’ said Poirot thoughtfully. ‘She takes drugs, of course. You have only to look at her eyes. And then there are her changeable moods. But I do not think Madame Rice is a real addict. She is at the beginning – not the end.’

‘And Nick?’

‘I do not think she takes drugs.’

‘I’m glad of that.’

★ ★ ★

There was a desk in Nick’s room, but little was kept in it. Here again, there was no sign of a will. Poirot was going through some drawers.

‘Surely, Poirot,’ I said embarrassed, ‘those are underclothes. Don’t you think – I mean – we can hardly . . .’

He laughed. ‘My poor Hastings, you belong to the Victorian era! Mademoiselle Nick would tell you so if she were here. And Mademoiselle Nick, if she wished to hide anything, would hide it here. Ah!’ He held up a packet of letters tied with a pink ribbon. ‘The love letters of Mr Michael Seton, I think.’ Quite calmly he began to open the letters.

‘Poirot,’ I cried. ‘You really can’t do that. It isn’t playing the game.’

‘I am not playing a game, *mon ami*. I am hunting down a murderer. Don’t worry – Ellen has probably read all of them!’

The letters began last winter.

New Year's Day

'Darling,

It's New Year and it seems too wonderful to be true – that you should love me. You've made all the difference to my life. I believe we both knew – from the very first moment we met. Happy New Year, my lovely girl.

Yours for ever, MICHAEL.'

March 2nd

'Dearest Love,

How I wish I could see you more often. I hate all this hiding, but honestly, Uncle Matthew really hates early marriages because they destroy a man's career. You could never destroy mine, you dear angel!

Yours, MICHAEL'

April 18th

'Dearest,

The whole thing is fixed. If I succeed (and I will succeed), I will be able to be firm with Uncle Matthew. Don't worry about me. The thing isn't half so dangerous as it sounds. And I couldn't get killed now that I know you have feelings for me. Everything will be all right, sweetheart.

Trust your Michael.'

The last was undated.

'Dearest,

Well, I'm off tomorrow. Feeling really excited and certain of success. There's a risk, of course, but all life's a risk really. By the way, somebody said I ought to make a will, so I have – on a half sheet of notepaper – and sent it to old Whitfield, the family lawyer. Somebody once told me that a man made a will of three words "All to Mother", and that was legal. My will was rather like that – and I remembered your name was really Magdala! A couple of my friends witnessed it. But dearest, I will be perfectly all right.

Good night and God bless you,

MICHAEL'

Poirot folded the letters together again.

‘You see, Hastings? We now know that Michael made a will which left everything he owned to Mademoiselle Nick and it is recorded in writing. And with the letters carelessly hidden like that, anyone could read them. Ellen, most certainly. We will try a little experiment on her before leaving.’

Ellen was cleaning the hall as we came downstairs. Poirot said, ‘You knew, I suppose, that Miss Buckley was engaged to the airman, Michael Seton?’

She looked very surprised. ‘What? The one in the newspapers? Well, no, I didn’t know that!’

‘Her complete and absolute surprise seemed *very* convincing to me,’ I mentioned when we got outside.

‘Yes. It really seemed genuine,’ said Poirot. ‘Hastings, I do not like it. There is something here that I do not understand.’

Chapter 14 *The Mystery of the Missing Will*

We went straight back to the nursing home. Nick looked surprised to see us again.

‘Mademoiselle,’ said Poirot. ‘This will of yours, I did not find it. You did not put it in the secret hiding place, by any chance?’

‘The secret what?’

‘Your maid, Ellen, says that there is a secret hiding place in the living room or the library. It seems she was a kitchen maid at *End House* as a young girl. The cook showed it to her.’

‘It’s the first I’ve ever heard of it! Are you sure Ellen isn’t making it up?’

‘I am not at all sure! There is something – strange – about this Ellen of yours.’

‘Oh! I wouldn’t call her strange. William’s an imbecile, and the child is an unpleasant little boy, but Ellen’s all right.’

‘Mademoiselle, let’s return to our subject – the last will of Magdala Buckley.’

‘I wrote that,’ said Nick with some pride.

‘You did not use a standard form for the will, then?’

‘No. I was just going off to the nursing home for the appendix operation, and Mr Croft said it was better to make a simple will and not try to be too legal.’

‘Monsieur Croft was there?’

‘Yes. It was he who asked me if I’d made a will. He said if you died without one, the Government took everything and that would be a pity. He asked Ellen and her husband in to witness it. Oh! Of *course*! What an idiot I’ve been! *Charles* has got it! Mr Croft said a lawyer was the proper person to take care of it so we put it in an envelope and sent it off to Charles straight away.’ She

lay back on her pillows, smiling. 'Charles has got it, and if you really want to see it, of course he'll show it to you.'

'Not without a letter from you,' said Poirot, smiling back.

'How silly!' She took a piece of paper from the table beside her bed. 'What will I say?'

He dictated some words, and Nick wrote them down.

'Thank you, Mademoiselle,' said Poirot, as he took it. He looked round the room. 'Your flowers are lovely.'

'Aren't they? And look here . . .' She pulled the paper from a large basket of fruit. Poirot stepped forward quickly. 'You have not eaten any?'

'No. Not yet.'

'Do not do so. You must eat nothing, Mademoiselle, that comes in from outside. *Nothing*. You understand?'

'Oh!' The colour went slowly from her face. 'You think it isn't over yet. You think they're still trying to kill me?'

He took her hand. 'Do not think of it. You are safe here. But remember – eat nothing that comes in from outside.'

★ ★ ★

A short time later we were shown into Charles Vyse's office, but the young lawyer denied getting any will from Nick.

'Is he lying, do you think?' I asked later.

'Impossible to tell. His face shows nothing.'

'Well, what do we do now?'

'We go and see Monsieur Croft.'

But when we got there it was a little difficult to get to the point of our visit. Both Mr and Mrs Croft talked so much and wanted to know all about everything: Were the poor dead girl's relations coming down? When was the funeral? What did the police think?

At last Poirot asked the question he had been waiting to ask.

‘Why, of course,’ said Mr Croft. ‘I just asked her if she’d made a will. More as a joke than anything else. And she wrote it out right then.’

‘Who witnessed it?’

‘Oh! Ellen and her husband.’

‘And afterwards?’

‘I posted it to Vyse. Right outside in the post box by the gate!’

‘So!’ said Poirot, when we were walking down to the hotel. ‘Who is lying? Monsieur Croft? Or Charles Vyse? I see no reason why Monsieur Croft should be lying. But all the same I am glad that he was cooking when we arrived. He left excellent fingerprints of his thumb and first finger on a corner of the newspaper that was on the kitchen table. I managed to tear it off and we will send it to our good friend Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard. For you know, Hastings, I cannot help feeling that our Monsieur Croft is a little too good to be genuine.’

Chapter 15 Strange Behaviour of Frederica

The Chief Constable, a Colonel Weston, came to see us soon after lunch.

‘We’re really lucky that you are here, Monsieur Poirot,’ he said again and again. ‘It’s a very strange business. Well, the girl ought to be safe enough in a nursing home. Still, if Vyse *is* the killer, *he’ll* not make any mistakes. The woman – well, there might be more hope there. Ten to one she’ll try again. Women have no patience.’

He then took from his pocket a torn piece of paper with writing on it and handed it to Poirot. ‘My police found this when they were searching the grounds. It’s the only thing they did find.’

Poirot looked closely at it. The writing was large and untidy.

‘ . . . must have money at once. If not, you know what will happen. I’m warning you.’

Poirot frowned. ‘May I keep it?’

‘Certainly. There are no fingerprints on it. I’ll be happy if it helps you in any way.’

When he had gone, Poirot examined the paper once more. ‘This could be blackmail! Someone at our party last night was being asked for money in a very unpleasant way. Of course, it is possible that it was one of the people we did not know. Come in,’ he said hearing a knock at the door.

It was Commander Challenger. ‘Hello,’ he said. ‘I wanted to know if you were making progress with your investigations.’

‘At this moment I don’t feel that I am!’ said Poirot.

‘That’s too bad. But I don’t really believe it, Monsieur Poirot. I’ve been hearing all about you and what a wonderful detective you are. You are going to solve this case, aren’t you?’

‘That I promise. You have the word of Hercule Poirot. I am the dog who stays on the scent and does not leave it.’

‘Good.’

‘I have suspicions of two people.’

‘I suppose I mustn’t ask you who they are?’

‘I would not tell you!’

‘My alibi is satisfactory, I trust,’ said Challenger.

Poirot smiled at the suntanned face in front of him. ‘You left Devonport at just after half past eight. You arrived here at five minutes past ten – twenty minutes after the crime had been committed. But the distance from Devonport is only just over thirty miles, and you have often driven it in an hour. So your alibi is not good at all!’

‘Well, I’m . . .’

‘Your alibi, as I say, is not good. But there are other things apart from alibis. You would like, I think, to marry Mademoiselle Nick?’

‘I’ve always wanted to marry her,’ he said softly, with emotion.

‘Exactly. However, Mademoiselle Nick was engaged to another man. A reason, perhaps, for killing the other man. But that is unnecessary when he dies the death of a hero.’

‘So it *is* true – that Nick was engaged to Michael Seton? There’s a rumour about that all over the town this morning.’

‘Yes – it is interesting how soon news travels. You never suspected it before?’

‘I knew Nick was engaged to someone – she told me so two days ago. But she didn’t say who it was.’

‘Well, he has left her, I would think, a very large fortune. So it is not a moment for killing Mademoiselle Nick – from your point of view. She cries for her lover now, but the heart heals itself. And I think, Monsieur, that she is very fond of you . . .’

There was a knock on the door. It was Frederica Rice. 'I've been looking for you,' she said to Challenger. 'They told me you were here. I wanted to know if you'd got my wristwatch back yet.'

'Oh, yes, I called for it this morning.'

He took it from his pocket and handed it to her. It was an unusual shape – round, like a globe, with a plain black strap. I remembered that I had seen one the same shape on Nick Buckley's wrist.

She looked from one to the other of us. 'Am I interrupting anything?'

'No, indeed, Madame. We were saying how quickly news travels – how everyone now knows that Mademoiselle Nick was engaged to that brave airman who died!'

'So Nick *was* engaged to Michael Seton!' exclaimed Frederica. 'I thought he was very attracted to her last autumn. And then, after Christmas, they seemed to lose interest.'

'The secret, they kept it very well.'

'That was because of old Sir Matthew, I suppose. Tell me, Monsieur Poirot, did you . . .'

She stopped and her face turned whiter still. Her eyes were fixed on the centre of the table.

'You are not well, Madame!'

I pushed a chair forward and helped her sit down. She shook her head, whispered, 'I'm all right,' and then she put her face between her hands. She sat up a minute later. 'How silly! George, don't look so worried. I've got a headache. I think I'll go and lie down. Perhaps tomorrow they'll let me see Nick.' She left the room.

Challenger frowned. 'You never know what that woman's doing. Nick may be fond of her, but I don't believe she's fond of

Nick! Are you going out, Monsieur Poirot?’ he asked, for Poirot had risen and was carefully brushing his hat.

‘Yes, I am going into the town.’

‘I’ve got nothing to do. May I come with you?’

‘Of course. It will be a pleasure.’

Poirot’s first stop was to a florist’s shop. ‘I must send some flowers to Mademoiselle Nick,’ he explained. He chose a gold basket, which he asked to be filled with orange flowers, and the whole thing was tied up with a large blue bow. The shop assistant gave him a card and he wrote on it: ‘With the good wishes of Hercule Poirot.’

‘I sent her some flowers this morning,’ said Challenger. ‘I might send her some fruit.’

‘No!’ said Poirot. ‘The eatable – it is not permitted.’

‘Who says so?’

‘I say so.’

‘No!’ said Challenger. ‘You’re still afraid for Nick!’

Chapter 16 Interview with Mr Whitfield

After the inquest the next day, Poirot and I went to speak with the Reverend Giles Buckley and his wife. Maggie's father and mother were charming, and fighting hard to keep control of the unhappiness caused by the tragedy that had robbed them of 'Our Maggie', as they called her.

'Madame, I am deeply sorry for your loss – and I admire your bravery!' Poirot said.

'Tears would not bring Maggie back to us,' said Mrs Buckley, sadly. 'But you are a great detective, Monsieur Poirot. You are going to find out the truth, aren't you?'

'I will not rest until I do, Madame.'

'Poor little Nick,' said Mrs Buckley. 'I had the saddest letter from her. She says she feels she asked Maggie down here to her death. I wish they would let me see her. It would be so much better for her if she could come back with me. I haven't seen her since last autumn when she was at Scarborough. Maggie spent the day with her and then Nick came back and spent a night with us. She's a pretty girl – though I can't say I like her friends or the sort of life she leads – well, it's not really her fault, poor child. She had a terrible childhood.'

'Well,' said Poirot. 'I must not stay any longer, I only wished to offer you my deep sympathy.'

'You have been very kind, Monsieur Poirot. And we are very grateful for all you are doing.'

'Very simple, lovely people,' I said, after we had left.

Poirot nodded. 'It makes the heart ache, does it not, *mon ami*? Such an unnecessary tragedy, so useless – so purposeless. And I, Hercule Poirot, did not prevent the crime!'

'Nobody could have prevented it.'

‘You speak without thinking, Hastings. No ordinary person could have prevented it – but what good is it to be Hercule Poirot with grey cells of a finer quality than other peoples’, if you can’t do more than ordinary people? But now,’ he said, ‘to London.’

‘London?’

‘Yes. We shall catch the two o’clock train. All is peaceful here. Mademoiselle is safe in the nursing home. No one can harm her. The watchdogs, therefore, can leave for a short time. There are one or two little pieces of information that I require.’

★ ★ ★

Poirot had arranged a meeting with Michael Seton’s lawyers *Whitfield, Pargiter & Whitfield*, and although it was after six o’clock, we were soon sitting in the office with Mr Whitfield, the head of the firm. He had a letter in front of him from the chief constable and another from some high official at Scotland Yard. ‘This is all very irregular and unusual, Sir,’ he said. ‘But under the circumstances I will be happy to do anything that is in my power to help you.’

‘Your firm acted as lawyers to Michael Seton?’

‘To *all* the Seton family, my dear Sir, for the last hundred years.’

‘Perfect! Did the late Sir Matthew Seton make a will?’

‘We made it for him.’

‘And he left his fortune – how?’

‘There were several bequests, but almost all of his large – his *very* large fortune – he left to Captain Michael Seton.’

‘Sir Matthew Seton’s death was unexpected, I understand?’ said Poirot.

‘Most unexpected. They found a cancer. An immediate operation was necessary and – he died.’

'I understand Captain Seton made a will before leaving England.'

'If you can call it a will – yes,' said Mr Whitfield. 'But it *is* properly witnessed, so it is legal. The truth is that at the time Captain Seton had little or nothing to leave. He felt, I suppose, that there was no need for lawyers.'

'And the conditions of this will?' asked Poirot.

'He leaves everything to his future wife, Miss Magdala Buckley.'

'And if Miss Buckley had died last Monday?'

'The money would go to whoever she had named in her will as her heirs – or, if she had not made a will, everything would go to her nearest family member.'

★ ★ ★

'It is all exactly as you thought, Poirot,' I said when we were outside.

'*Mon ami*, it had to be. We will go now to the restaurant where Japp has agreed to meet us for dinner.'

The Scotland Yard inspector greeted Poirot enthusiastically. 'It's years since I've seen you. I thought you were growing vegetables in the country.'

'I tried, Japp, I tried. But even when you grow vegetables, you cannot get away from murder.'

'Well, old friend, I've done your business. The fingerprints you sent me . . .'

'Yes?' said Poirot, with interest.

'Nothing, I'm afraid. Whoever the gentleman is, he hasn't got a criminal record in Britain. However, I sent a telegram to Melbourne – and nobody, criminal or not, of that description or name is known in Australia. So there may be something

suspicious after all. As to *Lazarus and Son*, they are always straight and honourable. They're in a bad way financially, though. People haven't had the money to buy paintings these last few years.'

Our business done, the evening became a very happy one. We were soon in the middle of remembering many, many old cases we'd worked on. I must say that I enjoyed talking over the past. Those had been good days. How old and experienced I felt now! Poor old Poirot. He was puzzled by this case – I could see that. His powers of detection were not what they used to be, I thought. I had the feeling that the murderer of Maggie Buckley would never be brought to justice.

'*Courage*, my friend,' said Poirot, hitting me playfully on the shoulder. 'All is not lost. Do not be unhappy, I beg of you.'

'That's all right. I'm all right.'

'And so am I. And so is Japp.'

'We're all alright,' declared Japp.

And on this pleasant note we said our goodbyes.

★ ★ ★

The following morning we went back to St Loo. When we arrived at the hotel Poirot rang up the nursing home and asked to speak to Nick. Suddenly I saw his face change.

'What? Say that again, please.'

He waited for a minute or two, then he said, 'Yes, yes. I will come at once.'

He turned a pale face to me. 'Why did I go away, Hastings? Why did I go away? Mademoiselle Nick is dangerously ill: poisoned with cocaine. They have got at her after all!'

Chapter 17 *A Box of Chocolates*

Dr Graham looked exhausted. 'She'll survive,' he said. 'The trouble was knowing how much she'd taken of the terrible stuff.'

'But how did it happen? How did they get at her?' Poirot asked angrily.

'It was a box of chocolates.'

'Ah! I told her to eat nothing – nothing – that came from outside. Was the cocaine in all the chocolates?'

'No. The girl ate one and two others also had cocaine in them. The rest were all right.'

★ ★ ★

Nick was sitting up in bed. She looked as if she had a fever and her hands shook violently. Poirot took her hand in his. 'Ah! Mademoiselle – Mademoiselle – did I not say that you were to eat nothing that came from outside?'

'And I didn't.'

'But these chocolates . . .'

'No, *you* sent them. Your card was in the box.'

Nick pointed towards the table by the bed.

'Ahh!' I gasped. So did Poirot. For on the card, in Poirot's handwriting, were the words, "With the good wishes of Hercule Poirot".

'Oh!' Poirot exclaimed, 'the clever, cruel devil! Ah! But he is very intelligent, this killer, yes! I should have expected this move. Yes, I should have expected it. But take courage, Mademoiselle. This is the last mistake I will make. I have been tricked – but it will not happen again. No. I promise you. Come, Hastings.'

Poirot quickly discovered from the nervous young doorman who had been on duty that the parcel had been brought 'by a gentleman'.

'A thin-faced gentleman – fair-haired?'

'He was fair-haired but I wouldn't say he was thin-faced.'

'Would Charles Vyse bring it himself?' I murmured to Poirot.

'It wasn't Mr Vyse,' the boy said. 'I know him. It was a bigger gentleman – handsome-looking – he came in a huge red car!'

'Lazarus!' I exclaimed.

'He left this parcel. It was addressed to Miss Buckley?' Poirot said. 'And what did you do with it?'

'I put it on the table. Everything that comes is put on here, Sir. Then the nurses take things up to the patients.'

'Do you remember what time this parcel arrived?'

'About five thirty. The post had just been, and that's usually about half past five.'

'Thank you. Now, I think we will see the nurse who took up the parcel.'

The nurse remembered taking the parcel up at six o'clock.

'Six o'clock,' murmured Poirot. 'Then the parcel was lying on the table for about thirty minutes. So, you took the parcel to Miss Buckley?'

'Yes, there was this box and some flowers from a Mr and Mrs Croft. And there was a parcel that had come by post – and *that* was also a box of chocolates.'

'What? A second box?'

'Yes. Miss Buckley said, "Oh! What a shame. I'm not allowed to eat them." Then she opened the lids to look inside and your card was in one.'

'From whom was the other box?'

‘There was no name inside.’

‘And which was the one that seemed as if it had come from me? The one sent by post or the other one?’

‘I can’t remember. I’ll go up and ask Miss Buckley if she remembers.’

‘Two boxes,’ said Poirot when she had gone. ‘There is confusion for you.’

The nurse returned. ‘Miss Buckley thinks the box from you was the one that didn’t come by post. But she isn’t sure.’

‘Is no one ever sure?’ said Poirot as we walked away. ‘In detective books – yes, they are. But life – real life – is always full of confusion.’

‘Lazarus,’ I said.

‘Yes, that is a surprise, is it not? I will be interested to see how he reacts when he realises we know. By the way, it will do no harm if people think that Mademoiselle is dying . . .’

★ ★ ★

Lazarus was outside the hotel, looking at something in his car. Poirot went straight up to him. ‘Yesterday evening, Monsieur Lazarus, you left a box of chocolates for Mademoiselle,’ he began.

Lazarus smiled. ‘Yes, I did. As a matter of fact, they were from Freddie. She asked me to get them. I took them round in the car.’

★ ★ ★

We found Frederica having tea in the lounge. She looked up with an anxious face. ‘What is this I hear about Nick being ill?’

‘It is a most mysterious affair, Madame. Tell me, did you send her a box of chocolates yesterday?’

‘Yes. But she asked me to get them for her. She phoned me.’

‘How did her voice sound – weak?’

‘No – quite strong. But different somehow. I didn’t realize it was Nick speaking at first.’

‘Are you absolutely certain, Madame, that it was your friend’s voice – apart from what she said?’

‘No,’ said Frederica slowly, ‘I’m not . . .’

The serious look on his face seemed to make her suspicious.

‘Is Nick – has anything happened?’ she asked, looking terrified.

Poirot nodded. ‘Those chocolates, Madame, were poisoned. Mademoiselle is at death’s door.’

‘Oh, I don’t understand! The other thing, yes, but not this. They *couldn’t* be poisoned. Nobody touched them but Jim and I. You’re making a terrible mistake, Monsieur Poirot.’

‘It is not I that make a mistake – even though my name was in the box. If Mademoiselle Nick dies . . .’ he said, and made a threatening movement with his hand.

She gave a little cry. He turned away, and we went up to the sitting-room.

‘I understand nothing – nothing! It is too simple – too stupid. And Madame Rice is not stupid – no. And what did she mean when she said, “The other thing, yes, but not this.” I tell you, Hastings, this is all very black – very black.’

‘It’s always darkest before dawn,’ I said comfortingly.

★ ★ ★

It was about five in the morning when Poirot woke me. He was standing by my bed looking pleased and happy. ‘It was very true what you said, *mon ami*. Oh! It was very true.’

I rubbed my eyes.

‘Always darkest before dawn – that is what you said. It has been very dark – and now it is dawn.’

I looked at the window.

‘No, no, Hastings. In the head! The mind! The little grey cells!’ He paused and then said quietly: ‘You see, Hastings, Mademoiselle is dead.’

‘What?’ I cried.

‘Hush – hush. Not really – but for twenty-four hours. I have arranged it with the doctors, with the nurses. You understand, Hastings? The murderer has been successful. And now, we will see what happens next . . .’

Chapter 18 *The Face at the Window*

I was unfortunate enough to wake up with a fever. I have had occasional fevers ever since I once had malaria. As a result, I spent most of the day sleeping in a large armchair with a blanket over my knees. Every two or three hours or so, Poirot would come in, full of energy, and report progress. ‘How are you, *mon ami*? How I sympathise with you. But it is a good thing, perhaps. The play that I am putting on – you would not act as well as I do. I have just ordered a wreath – a huge wreath of lilies, my friend. The best flower for funerals. Large quantities of lilies. And the card with it says, “With greatest regret. From Hercule Poirot.” Ah! What a comedy!’ And then he left again.

★ ★ ★

‘I’ve just had a very sad conversation with Madame Rice,’ was his next piece of information, adding that she was very well dressed in black. “My poor friend,” she says to me. “What a tragedy! Nick, was so full of life. It’s impossible to think of her as dead.” I agree. “It is”, I say, “the joke of death to take the young like that. The old and useless are left.”’

★ ★ ★

It was late afternoon when I next saw him.

‘I will not dress formally for dinner,’ he said. ‘I must play the part of the unhappy old man, you understand. I am broken by my failure to guard Mademoiselle Nick. I will eat hardly any dinner – but in my own room I will eat some cakes I bought at a bakery. And you?’

‘Some more medicine, I think,’ I said sadly.

‘My poor Hastings. Take courage, all will be well tomorrow. And tomorrow, if I am not mistaken, certain things will happen – or else, or else I am wrong from start to finish. I have hopes of something arriving in tomorrow’s post.’

I woke in the morning feeling weak but the fever had gone. I also felt very hungry. Poirot and I had breakfast served in our sitting room.

‘Well?’ I said as he looked through his letters. ‘Has the post brought what you expected?’

He pushed a letter across to me. It was a report by an expert who he had asked to examine the picture of old Nicholas Buckley that Lazarus had offered fifty pounds for. It stated that it was worth twenty at most.

‘What a mistake in judgment for a clever young man,’ Poirot said and picked up another envelope.

I opened my own mail. The first was information about a spiritualist meeting.

‘If all else fails, we must go to the spiritualists and ask them to find the killer,’ I remarked. ‘They say that when called, the spirit of the victim comes back and names the murderer.’

‘It would not help us,’ said Poirot. ‘I doubt if Maggie Buckley knew who it was who shot her. Well! You talk of the dead speaking, and here is a letter from her.’

It was from Mrs Buckley and read as follows:

'Dear Mr Poirot,

On my return I found a letter written by my poor child the day she arrived at St Loo. There is nothing of interest to you, but I thought perhaps you would like to see it.

Thanking you for your kindness,

Yours sincerely,

JEAN BUCKLEY.'

Maggie's letter brought tears to my eyes. It was so very ordinary and with no thought of tragedy:

'Dear Mother,

I arrived safely. It was quite a comfortable journey and there were only two people in the carriage all the way to Exeter.

It is lovely weather here. Nick seems very well and happy – a little nervous, perhaps, but I cannot see why she should have sent a telegram for me to come immediately. Tuesday would have been perfectly all right.

We are going to tea with some neighbours. They are Australians and Nick says they are kind but not really her type of people. I will post this in the box by the gate, then it will catch the post. I'll write again tomorrow.

*Your loving daughter,
MAGGIE.'*

'The voice of the dead,' said Poirot, quietly. 'And it tells us – nothing.'

'The box by the gate,' I remarked. 'That's where Croft said he posted the will. Is there nothing else of interest among your letters?'

'Nothing. Hastings, I am very unhappy. I am still in the dark. I understand nothing.'

At that moment the telephone rang. Poirot went over to answer it. Immediately I saw the intense excitement on his face, although he himself said so little during the conversation that I

could not understand what it was about. Then he put the phone down and came back to where I was sitting.

‘That was Monsieur Charles Vyse. This morning he received a will signed by his cousin, Miss Buckley, dated February 25th.’

‘What? Do you think he is speaking the truth, Poirot?’

‘Are you asking if I think that he has had it all this time, Hastings? Well, it is all a little strange. But I told you if Mademoiselle Nick was dead, we should have developments – and here they are!’

‘Extraordinary,’ I said. ‘I suppose this is the will which makes Frederica Rice heir to everything except *End House*?’

‘Monsieur Vyse said nothing about the contents. But it was witnessed, he tells me, by Ellen Wilson and her husband.’

‘So we are back at the old problem. Frederica Rice. Frederica Rice,’ I repeated for no real reason. ‘A pretty name.’

‘Prettier than Freddie,’ said Poirot with disapproval.

‘There aren’t many short forms of Frederica,’ I said. ‘It’s not like Margaret where you can have half a dozen – Maggie, Margot, Madge, Marjie, Meg, Peggie.’

‘True. Now that letter from Mademoiselle Maggie – I want to look at it again. Something in it seemed a bit strange.’

He read it again to himself as I looked out of the window, watching the yachts in the bay. Suddenly I heard a noise. I turned round. Poirot was holding his head in his hands and moving backwards and forwards. ‘Oh! But I have been blind – blind. Complicated? No, no. This case is simple – extremely simple. And I saw nothing – nothing. Now all the things that have puzzled me, all the things that have seemed a little unnatural – they all have their place.’

‘You mean – you know everything?’

‘Nearly everything. My friend, do you remember that Mademoiselle Nick said she wanted to put on a play at *End House*? Tonight, *we* put on a play in *End House*. But it will be produced by Hercule Poirot and Mademoiselle Nick will have a part to play in it.’ He smiled suddenly. ‘Hastings, there will be a spirit in this play. Yes, a ghost. No, I will say no more. Tonight, Hastings, we will reveal the truth. But now, there is much to do – much to do.’ He hurried from the room.

Chapter 19 Poirot Produces a Play

It was a strange group of people that met at *End House*. When I arrived I was taken into the dining room by Ellen and when I looked round I realized that every person on Poirot's list from A. to I. was present. Even Mrs Croft was there, in a wheelchair. 'This is a surprise, isn't it?' she said, cheerfully. 'Come and sit by me, Captain Hastings.'

Charles Vyse was standing by the fireplace. Poirot was beside him, talking seriously in a quiet voice that only Vyse could hear. I looked round the room. After showing me in, Ellen had sat down on a chair just beside the door. On another chair, sitting very straight, was her husband. The child, called Alfred, sat between them. The rest sat round the dining table. Frederica was in a black dress and Lazarus sat beside her, while George Challenger and Croft were on the other side of the table. Now Charles Vyse took his place at the head of the table, and Poirot sat down on a chair next to Lazarus.

The young lawyer began to talk. 'In an ordinary case, the will of a deceased person is read after the funeral, but because of Monsieur Poirot's special wish, I am going to read it here and now. The will itself, although dated last February, only arrived by post this morning. However, it was, without a doubt, written by my cousin and it is properly witnessed.'

Every eye was on his face as he began to read.

'This is the last Will and Testament of Magdala Buckley. I appoint my cousin Charles Vyse as my executor. I leave everything to Mildred Croft with thanks for her services to my father, Philip Buckley, which nothing can ever properly repay.

Signed: MAGDALA BUCKLEY

Witnesses: ELLEN WILSON

WILLIAM WILSON.'

I couldn't believe it! Nor could anyone else. Only Mrs Croft nodded her head in understanding. 'It's true,' she said, quietly. 'Philip Buckley was out in Australia, and if it hadn't been for me . . . well, it's been a secret and it had better remain a secret. Of course Nick knew. We came down here because I'd always been curious about *End House* – Philip Buckley talked about it. And that dear girl knew all about it and couldn't do enough for us. And now – this! Well, if anyone says no one is grateful in this world, I'll tell them they're wrong!'

Poirot looked at Vyse. 'Had you any idea of this?'

Vyse shook his head. 'I knew Philip Buckley had been in Australia. But I never heard of any scandal there.'

'I presume, Monsieur Vyse,' Poirot leaned forward, 'that as the closest relative you could contest that will? There is a huge fortune involved which was not the case when the will was made.'

Vyse looked at him coldly. 'The will is perfectly legal. I would not dream of contesting my cousin's wishes about what happens to her property.'

'You're an honest fellow,' said Mrs Croft approvingly. 'And I'll see you don't lose by it. The dear sweet girl – I wish she could see us now. Perhaps she can – who knows?'

‘Perhaps . . .’ said Poirot. Suddenly an idea seemed to come to him. ‘I have an idea! We are all here, seated round a table. Let us hold a séance. Yes, yes, Hastings is an experienced medium. To get a message from the other world – the opportunity is perfect! I feel the conditions are good. You feel the same, Hastings?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘I knew it! Quick, put out the lights.’

Everybody was, I think, still in shock from the will and did as they were told. The room was not completely dark. The curtains were not closed, the window was open for it was a hot night and a faint light came in. I closed my eyes and took some deep breaths in a noisy manner.

Presently Poirot murmured, ‘Yes, that looks good – he is in a trance. Soon things will begin to happen.’

There is something about sitting in the dark, waiting, that fills one with fear and although I had an idea of what was about to happen, I still got a shock as I saw the dining room door slowly opening. Standing in the doorway was a white shadowy figure. Nick Buckley . . . She came forward with a kind of floating motion that made her look as if she was nothing human – and the silence was broken.

There was a cry from the wheelchair beside me. A strange sound from Mr Croft. A shout from Challenger. Charles Vyse pushed back his chair, I think. Lazarus leaned forward. Frederica alone made no sound or movement. And then Ellen jumped up from her chair. ‘It’s her!’ she screamed. ‘People who are murdered always come back! It’s her! It’s her!’

And then the lights came on again. I saw Poirot standing by the light switch, the smile of the successful magician on his face. Nick stood in the middle of the room, covered by a white cloth.

Frederica touched her friend with a trembling hand. 'Nick,' she said. 'You're – you're real!'

Nick laughed. 'Yes, I'm real enough. Thank you so much for what you did for my father, Mrs Croft. But I'm afraid you won't be able to enjoy the benefit of that will just yet.'

'Oh,' gasped Mrs Croft. 'Oh, take me away, Bert. Take me away. It was all a joke, my dear – all a joke. Honest.'

'A strange type of joke,' said Nick.

The door opened again and a man entered. To my surprise I saw that it was Inspector Japp. He smiled and walked towards the figure in the wheelchair.

'Hello, hello, hello,' he said with satisfaction. 'It's Milly Merton! Playing your old tricks again, my dear? Cleverest forgery we've ever had, is Milly Merton. We knew that the car they'd made their last escape in had been involved in an accident. But even a back injury wouldn't stop Milly from playing her tricks.'

'Was that will a forgery?' Vyse's voice was amazed.

'Of course it was a forgery,' said Nick. 'I left *End House* to you, Charles, and everything else to Frederica!'

She walked over to her friend. Just at that moment a flash of light was seen at the window and the sound of a bullet rang out. Then there was another shot, followed by a cry and a body falling outside . . . Frederica was on her feet, with a thin line of blood running down her arm.

Chapter 20 J.

With a shout, Poirot ran to the window and Challenger was with him. A moment later they reappeared, carrying the body of a man. His face was white and thin which made him look as if he had been very ill. Down one side there was a stream of blood.

Frederica came slowly forward. Poirot went to her. 'You are hurt, Madame?'

She shook her head. 'The bullet brushed my shoulder – that is all.'

She moved his hand away gently and bent over the man. His eyes opened and he saw her looking down at him.

'I've killed you this time, I hope,' he said violently, and then, his voice changing suddenly till it sounded like a child's, 'Oh! Freddie, I didn't mean it. I didn't really want to do it. You've always been so good to me . . .'

'It's all right.' She knelt down beside him.

'I didn't mean . . .'

His head dropped back onto the floor. The sentence was never finished. Frederica rose slowly from her knees and turned to the rest of us. 'That was my husband,' she said quietly.

'J,' I murmured.

Poirot nodded a quick agreement. 'Yes,' he said softly. 'Always I felt that there was a J.'

'He was my husband,' said Frederica again. She sat down on a chair that Lazarus brought for her. 'He was a terrible man. He taught me to take drugs and I have been trying to give them up ever since I left him. He used to turn up and demand money from me – with threats. If I did not give him money he would shoot himself, he said. Then he started saying he would shoot

me. He was mad – crazy . . . I suppose he was the one who shot Maggie Buckley. He must have thought it was me.'

'I should have said something, I suppose. But I wasn't sure. And those strange accidents Nick had – they made me feel that perhaps it was someone else. And then I saw a bit of his handwriting on a torn piece of paper on Monsieur Poirot's table. It was part of a letter he had sent me. Since then I have felt that it was only a matter of time . . . But I don't understand about the chocolates. He wouldn't have wanted to poison *Nick*. I don't see how he could have had anything to do with that. I've thought and thought about it.'

Chapter 21 The Person – K.

Lazarus came quickly to her side. ‘My dear,’ he said. ‘My dear.’ Poirot went to the small table, poured out a glass of wine and brought it to her, standing over her while she drank it. She handed the glass back to him and smiled. ‘I’m all right now,’ she said. ‘What – what should we do next?’

She looked at Japp, but he shook his head. ‘I’m on holiday, Mrs Rice. Just helping an old friend. The St Loo police are in charge of the case.’

‘Monsieur Poirot,’ said Nick. ‘Can’t we keep it quiet? After all – I’m the centre of all this. And there will be no more attacks on me now.’

‘That is true, but . . .’

‘You’re thinking of Maggie. But, Monsieur Poirot, nothing will bring Maggie back to life again! If you make all this public, you’ll only bring a terrible lot of suffering and publicity on Frederica – and she doesn’t deserve it.’

‘So that is what you wish, Mademoiselle? To keep it quiet?’

‘Yes. Please, dear Monsieur Poirot.’

Poirot looked slowly round the room. ‘What do you all say?’

‘I agree,’ I said, as Poirot looked at me.

‘I, too,’ said Lazarus.

‘It’s the best thing to do,’ said Challenger.

‘Let’s forget everything that’s happened in this room tonight.’ This came from Croft.

‘You would say that!’ exclaimed Japp.

‘Don’t be hard on me, dear,’ his wife said to Nick. Nick made no reply.

‘Ellen?’

‘Me and William won’t say a word, Sir.’

‘And you, Monsieur Vyse?’

‘A thing like this can’t be kept quiet,’ said Charles Vyse. ‘The police must be told.’

Poirot gave a sudden laugh. ‘So you are seven to one. The good Japp is neutral.’

‘I’m on holiday,’ said Japp, with a wide smile.

‘Seven to one,’ said Poirot. ‘You know, Monsieur Vyse, you are an honest man. I, too, am for the truth. Mademoiselle – you forced me into the case. I came into it at your wish. You cannot silence me now.’

He lifted a threatening forefinger in a way that I knew well. ‘Sit down – all of you – and I will tell you the truth. I have a list here of the people connected with the crime. I numbered them with the letters of the alphabet including the letter J. J. was for a person unknown – linked to the crime by one of the others. I did not know who J. was until tonight. But yesterday, I suddenly realized that I had made a serious mistake. I added *another* letter to my list. The letter K – for a person who should have been included in the original list, but who was forgotten.’

He touched Frederica on the shoulder. ‘You can be sure, Madame, that your husband was not guilty of murder. It was the person K. who shot Mademoiselle Maggie!’

‘But who is K.?’

Poirot nodded to Japp who stepped forward.

‘On instructions from him, I arrived here early in the evening and was taken secretly into the house by Monsieur Poirot. I hid myself behind the curtains in the living room. When everyone was sitting in this room, a young lady entered the living room and went to the fireplace and opened a small cupboard in the wooden panels. She took out a pistol. With this in her hand she left the room. I followed her and, by opening the door just a

little, I was able to watch what she did. Coats had been left in the hall by the visitors when they arrived. The young lady carefully cleaned the pistol with a handkerchief and then placed it in the pocket of a grey coat, the property of Mrs Rice . . .’

‘No!’ Nick cried. ‘This is not true – every word of it is a lie!’

Poirot pointed a hand at her. ‘See!’ he said. ‘The person K! It was Mademoiselle Nick who shot her cousin, Maggie Buckley.’

‘Are you mad?’ cried Nick. ‘Why should I kill Maggie?’

‘In order to inherit the money left to her by Michael Seton! Maggie’s name, too, was Magdala Buckley, not Margaret as I had believed. At first I thought Maggie was a short form of Margaret – but it was to her Michael Seton was engaged, not to you.’

‘You – you!’

She stood there shaking – unable to speak. Poirot turned to Japp. ‘You telephoned the police?’

‘Yes, they are waiting in the hall now. They’ve got the warrant for her arrest.’

‘You’re all mad!’ cried Nick. She moved quickly to Frederica’s side. ‘Freddie, give me your watch as – as a souvenir, will you?’

Slowly Frederica took the watch from her wrist and handed it to Nick.

‘Thanks. And now – I suppose we must carry on with this perfectly stupid comedy.’

‘The comedy you planned and produced in *End House*,’ said Poirot. ‘Yes – but you should not have given the star part to Hercule Poirot. That, Mademoiselle, was your very serious mistake.’

Chapter 22 The End of the Story

‘You want me to explain?’ Poirot looked round with a pleased smile. We had moved into the living room and there were fewer of us than before. Ellen and her husband and child had gone back to their part of the house, and the Crofts had, of course, been asked to go with the police. Frederica, Lazarus, Challenger, Vyse and I remained.

‘Well, I confess – I was fooled completely. The little Nick, she had convinced me. Ah! Madame, when you said that your friend was a clever little liar – how right you were!’

‘Nick always told lies,’ said Frederica ‘That’s why I didn’t really believe in these escapes of hers.’

‘And I – idiot that I was – did!’

‘Didn’t Miss Buckley’s accidents really happen?’ I asked, hopelessly confused.

‘They were invented to give the idea that Mademoiselle Nick’s life was in danger. But I will tell you the story as I have worked it out. At the beginning of the story, then, we have Nick Buckley, young and beautiful, passionately devoted to her home. But the house has to be mortgaged. She wants money – she wants it badly. She meets young Seton at Le Touquet, she knows that his uncle is worth millions of pounds. She thinks that all her problems will be solved. They meet at Scarborough, he takes her up in his seaplane and then – disaster – he meets her cousin Maggie and falls in love with her at first sight. They become secretly engaged. Only one person knows – Mademoiselle Nick. And that is how Mademoiselle hears of the will.

‘Then comes the unexpected death of Sir Matthew Seton, and soon after, Michael Seton’s plane is reported missing. Immediately a dangerous plan comes into our young lady’s

head. Michael Seton had not known that Nick's real name was Magdala, the same as the woman he was planning to marry. His will is clearly quite informal – but in the eyes of the world, for they had been seen together at Le Touquet and Scarborough, it is with *her*, Nick, that his name is linked. If she says that she is engaged to him, no one will be surprised. But to do that successfully, Maggie must be removed from the scene.

'She arranges for Maggie to come and stay in a few days' time. Then she has her escapes from death. And then – she sees my name in the paper and she decides to make me an accomplice! The bullet through the hat that falls at my feet. Oh, the pretty comedy! And I am taken in! Deceived! Good! She has got a valuable witness on her side. I make the mistake of asking her to send for a friend. She sends for Maggie to come a day earlier.

'She leaves us at the dinner table and, hearing on the radio that Seton's death is a fact, puts her plan into action. She has plenty of time to steal Seton's letters to Maggie and look through them and select the few that will make it seem as if she, Nick, were Seton's fiancée. She places the letters in her own room. Then, later, she and Maggie leave the fireworks and go back to the house. She tells her cousin to put on her shawl while she goes to get coats for herself and Madame Rice. Then, following Maggie quietly, she shoots her. She then goes quickly into the house again and hides the pistol in the secret panel (which she thinks nobody knows about). Then she waits till the body is discovered, runs down and goes out through the window.'

'But those poisoned chocolates . . .' said Frederica.

'All part of the same plan. If Nick was attacked after Maggie was dead, that made it clear that Maggie's death had been a mistake. When she thinks the time is right, she rings Madame Rice and asks her to get a box of chocolates. She makes her voice

sound a little different so that you might have doubts when you are questioned. Then, when the box arrives, she fills some of the chocolates with cocaine (she had cocaine with her, cleverly hidden), she eats one of them and becomes ill – but not too ill.

‘And the card – *my* card! Ah! She is so clever! It was the one I sent with the flowers. Simple, was it not? Yes, but it had to be thought of . . .’

There was a pause, then Frederica asked, ‘Why did she put the pistol in my coat?’

‘Tell me, Monsieur Lazarus,’ Poirot said, ‘did you and Nick ever have a relationship?’

Lazarus shook his head. ‘No, I was attracted to her at one time. And then – I don’t know why – I stopped being attracted to her.’

‘Ah!’ said Poirot, nodding his head. ‘That was her tragedy. She attracted people – and then they stopped caring for her. Instead of liking her better and better, you fell in love with her friend. She began to hate Madame. And she remembered the will she had written – she did not know that Croft had destroyed it and his wife had written another one. Madame (or so the world would say) had a motive for wanting her death. So it was Madame she telephoned asking for chocolates. Tonight, the will would have been read, naming Madame as her heiress – then the pistol would have been found in her coat – the pistol used to kill Maggie.’

‘I may be a bit stupid,’ said Challenger, ‘but I don’t understand the part about the will yet.’

‘That’s a different business altogether. The Crofts are hiding from the police down here. Mademoiselle Nick needed an operation. She had made no will. The Crofts persuaded her to make one and said they would post it. Then, if anything

happened to her – if she had died – they would produce a cleverly forged will – leaving the money to Mrs Croft with a reference to Australia and Phillip Buckley.

‘But Mademoiselle Nick had her appendix removed quite satisfactorily so the forged will was no good but they held on to it, just in case Nick was killed in an accident. Then the attacks on her life began. The Crofts were hopeful once more. Finally, I announced her death. The forged will was immediately posted to Monsieur Vyse. Of course, when they first knew her, the Crofts thought Nick was much richer than she is. They knew nothing about the mortgage.’

‘What I really want to know, Monsieur Poirot,’ said Lazarus, ‘is how you actually found out about to all this.’

‘Ah! There I am ashamed. I was so slow – so slow. There were things that worried me – yes. Things that seemed not quite right. Differences between what Mademoiselle Nick told me and what other people told me. Unfortunately, I always believed Nick.

‘And then when I told her to send for a friend she promised to do so – and did not say that she had already sent for Mademoiselle Maggie. It seemed less suspicious to her – but it was a mistake. Because Maggie Buckley wrote a letter home and in it she used a phrase that puzzled me: “I cannot see why she should have sent a telegram for me to come immediately. Tuesday would have been perfectly all right.” That mention of Tuesday could only mean one thing. Maggie had been coming to stay on Tuesday anyway.

‘For the first time I looked at Mademoiselle Nick in a different way. I said, “Perhaps she is the one who is lying and not the other people?”

‘I said to myself, “Let us be simple: What has really happened?” And I saw that what had really happened was that Maggie Buckley had been killed. Just that! But who could want

Maggie Buckley dead? And then I thought of something else – a few foolish words that Hastings had said five minutes earlier. He had said that there were plenty of short names for Margaret – and it occurred to me to ask myself what Mademoiselle Maggie's real name was? Then it came to me! Supposing her name was Magdala! It was a Buckley name. Supposing . . .

'In my mind I re-read the letters of Michael Seton. Yes, there was a mention of Scarborough – but Maggie had been in Scarborough with Nick – her mother had told me so. And it explained why there were so few letters. If a girl keeps her love letters at all, she keeps them all. Why only these few?

'And I remembered that there was no name mentioned in them. They all began with something affectionate like "Darling". Nowhere in them was there the name – Nick. And Mademoiselle Nick had had an operation for appendicitis on February 27th last. There is a letter from Michael Seton dated March 2nd, and there is no mention of anxiety, of illness or anything unusual.

'Then I went through a list of questions that I had made. And I answered them based on my new idea. In all but a few, the result was simple and convincing. And I answered, too, another question which I had asked myself earlier. Why did Mademoiselle Nick buy a black dress? – Because she and her cousin had to be dressed alike and she knew that her cousin, who had few clothes, would wear a black evening dress. That was the true answer. A girl would not buy black before she knew her lover was dead.

'And so I, in turn, put on my little drama. And the thing I hoped for happened! Nick had been extremely firm about the question of a secret panel. She had declared there was no such thing. But if there were, she would know of it. Was it possible that she had hidden the pistol there? With the intention of using it to make someone else look suspicious later?

‘I let her see that things looked very bad for Madame and, as I had guessed, she was unable to resist giving us the final proof that Madame was guilty. We were all safely in here. She was waiting outside for the right moment to make her entrance. It was absolutely safe, she thought, to take the pistol and put it in Madame’s coat . . . And so – in the end – she failed . . .’ Poirot finished.

‘What about Ellen?’ I asked. ‘Did she know or suspect anything?’

‘No. She decided to stay in the house that night because Nick had insisted much too strongly that she should go out and see the fireworks. Ellen told me that she “felt in her bones that something was going to happen”, but she thought it was going to happen to Madame Rice. She knew Miss Nick’s temper, she said, and that she had been a strange little girl.’

‘Yes,’ murmured Frederica. ‘Yes, let us think of her like that. A little girl who couldn’t help herself . . . I will, anyway.’ Frederica smiled sadly. ‘I’m glad I gave her my watch.’

‘Yes, Madame.’

She looked up at him quickly. ‘You know about the watches, too?’

Poirot took her hand and raised it gently to his lips. ‘Of course, Madame.’

Charles Vyse got to his feet. ‘I must see about some kind of defence for Nick, get her a good lawyer . . .’

‘There will be no need, I think,’ said Poirot quietly. ‘Not if I am correct in my thinking.’ He turned suddenly on Challenger. ‘That’s where you put the cocaine, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘In those wristwatches.’

‘I – I . . .’ Challenger stammered.

‘Do not try and deceive me with your friendly manner. It has taken in Hastings – but it does not deceive me. You make a lot of money out of it, do you not – the dealing in drugs? I advise you, if you do not want the police to know, go.’

And to my great surprise, Challenger went from the room immediately.

Poirot laughed. ‘I told you, *mon ami*. Your instincts are always wrong!’

‘Cocaine was in the wristwatch?’ I asked in surprise.

‘Yes, yes. That is how Mademoiselle Nick had it with her so conveniently at the nursing home for the chocolates. Tonight she needed it for a different reason. It will be a full dose this time.’

‘You mean . . .?’ I said shocked.

‘It is the best way. Better than the hangman’s rope . . .’

‘I must be going,’ said Charles Vyse with disapproval as he left the room.

Poirot looked from Frederica to Lazarus. ‘You are going to get married – eh?’

‘As soon as we can,’ said Lazarus.

‘And indeed, Monsieur Poirot,’ said Frederica, ‘with happiness ahead, I will not need a wristwatch any more.’

‘I hope you will be happy, Madame,’ said Poirot gently. ‘You have suffered greatly. And in spite of everything, you still have a good heart . . .’

‘I will look after her,’ said Lazarus. ‘My business is not doing well, but I believe it will improve. And if it doesn’t, well – Frederica does not mind being poor – with me.’

Poirot looked up at the picture of old Sir Nicholas. ‘Of all my questions, one is still unanswered. Tell me, why did you offer fifty pounds for that picture?’

Lazarus smiled. 'Mr Poirot, I am a dealer. That picture is not worth more than twenty pounds. I knew that if I offered Nick fifty, she would immediately suspect it was worth more and would have it valued by someone else. Then she would find that I had offered her far more than it was worth. The next time I offered to buy a picture, she would have accepted my offer immediately.'

'Yes, and then?'

'The picture on the far wall is worth at least five thousand pounds,' said Lazarus, smiling.

'Ah!' Poirot took in a long breath. 'Now I know *everything*,' he said happily.

CHARACTER LIST

Hercule Poirot: a very famous Belgian detective, now retired – has lived in England for many years

Captain Hastings: was once Poirot's full-time companion and wrote about the cases Poirot investigated – he now lives in Argentina, but is on holiday with Poirot

Nick Buckley: a young woman who is the owner of End House

Inspector Japp: a senior detective at Scotland Yard

Frederica (Freddie) Rice: a close friend of Nick's

Commander George Challenger: used to be an officer in the British Royal Navy

Jim Lazarus: a member of a family of London art dealers and is also a friend of Nick's

Ellen Wilson: Nick's cook and housekeeper

William Wilson: Ellen's husband and Nick's gardener

Charles Vyse: Nick's cousin and also her lawyer

Maggie Buckley: Nick's cousin

Michael Seton: an airman who is flying round the world on his own in a seaplane

Sir Matthew Seton: Michael's multi-millionaire uncle

Bert Croft: an Australian who rents a cottage from Nick

Milly Croft: Bert's wife – an invalid

Jean Buckley: Maggie's mother

Reverend Giles Buckley: Maggie's father

Dr Graham: the local doctor

CULTURAL NOTES

Cornwall

This is the most southerly county of Britain on the western side of the country. Cornwall and its neighbouring county of Devon have very picturesque coasts, with seaside towns, ports and harbours. It became fashionable during the Victorian era (the second half of the 19th century) for middle and upper class people to take holidays by the sea and to swim. It became known as the 'English Riviera' – comparing it to the French Riviera. In the story, St Loo is not a real place, neither is the Majestic Hotel. However, it is based on the Imperial Hotel in Torquay, the town where Agatha Christie was born and grew up. Places mentioned in the story, such as Tavistock and Devonport, are real. Agatha Christie loved this part of Britain and had her home in Devon.

Wills and inheritance

When someone wishes to leave money or property to friends or relatives after death, they write a will. This is a document stating what each family member, friend or other person or organisation should receive. If there is no will, the closest relative will usually inherit everything. To be legal, the act of signing the will document has to be witnessed by two people – in the story the witnesses are the servant Ellen and her husband. A will can be changed at any time, provided the new version is signed and witnessed correctly. A lawyer does not have to be involved.

In the story Nick Buckley has inherited End House after the death of her brother. Her closest relative is her cousin, Charles Vyse. So, if Nick dies, he would inherit the house. She plans to leave everything else to Freddie (Frederica) Rice, her best friend, who would also benefit if Nick Buckley were to be left money in someone else's will.

Mortgage

This is usually a large loan from a bank, based on the value of a house or similar property. In the story, a large sum of money has been borrowed in the past by the Buckley family, using End House to secure the loan. If someone buys or inherits the house, they would have to pay back the loan in the future.

Ranks in the British Royal Navy

In the story, Commander Challenger is a senior officer in the Royal Navy. Commander is one rank below Captain – the officer that controls a ship.

The War

At the time of writing, this referred to what we now call World War I, or the First World War, that took place between 1914 and 1918. Britain, France and Russia fought against Germany. Many millions of soldiers and civilians died throughout Europe.

Post mortems and inquests

In the UK, when a person dies the cause of death has to be officially certified by a doctor. If the doctor does not know why the person died – for example if the death was sudden or suspicious – they ask for a post mortem. This is a medical examination to find out the cause of death, and is usually done by an expert doctor called a pathologist, who removes the internal organs of the dead person and tests them.

In cases of sudden, violent or suspicious death, it is common to hold a public inquiry called an inquest to find out why the person died. The coroner is the person in charge of the inquest, and the official cause of death is decided by a jury of twelve ordinary people.

At the inquest the coroner and the jury hear medical evidence, as well as evidence from any other people that may be relevant. The family of the person who died and members of the public can also attend the inquest.

Once all the evidence has been heard, the jury gives its verdict – for example natural death, accidental death, suicide or murder.

The structure of the police in England

The structure of the police force and the ranks of the men and women who work in it are almost exactly the same as when the Metropolitan Police was created for London by the British Home Secretary, Sir Robert Peel, in 1829. The ranks, starting at the lowest, are: Police Constable, Sergeant, Inspector, Chief Inspector, Superintendent, Chief Superintendent. In overall charge of each regional police force is the Chief Constable.

In the story, the police officer that comes to investigate the murder of Maggie Buckley is a mid-ranking inspector – appropriate for the crime of murder. However, the Chief Constable, Colonel Weston, also becomes involved as the Buckley family is important in the area.

Scotland Yard is the headquarters of the British police – it is situated near the Houses of Parliament in central London. In the story, Inspector Japp, an old colleague of Poirot's, is based there.

Cocktails

These strong alcoholic drinks became popular in the 1920s amongst the upper classes. They would be different mixtures of spirits with other drinks, and given special names.

Malaria

Malaria is a serious disease that is carried by mosquitoes, small flying insects which feed on human blood. The disease is common in hot and wet parts of the world such as Africa and Asia. Bad cases of malaria can affect the brain, and even today the disease kills nearly one million people throughout the world every year. It is characterised by a severe fever.

At the time of the story, malaria was treated by a drug called quinine. Most people who have the disease get better. However, if you have had malaria once, the disease can come back from time to time, and needs to be treated again. This is why, in the story, Hastings realises he has had another attack of malaria when he gets a fever.

Spiritualism

This became popular during the Victorian era in Britain. People called 'mediums' claimed to be able to communicate with the spirits of the dead. They would organise 'seances', or meetings, where a group of people would sit in a darkened room and try to send and receive messages to and from dead relatives or friends. Sometimes this was just trickery, to deceive people into paying money in order to communicate with a loved one.

GLOSSARY

Key

n = noun

v = verb

phr v = phrasal verb

adj = adjective

adv = adverb

excl = exclamation

exp = expression

abruptly (adv)

doing something in a sudden or unpleasant manner

accomplice (n)

a person who helps to commit a crime

alibi (n)

proof you were somewhere else when a crime was committed

appendicitis (n)

a medical condition when the appendix needs to be removed

at your service (exp)

ready to serve someone

be aware of (adj)

to know about something

beg (v)

to ask someone to do something anxiously or eagerly

bequest (n)

money or property which you legally leave to someone when you die

blackmail (n)

the action of threatening to do something unpleasant to someone unless they do what you want them to do

blanket (n)

a large piece of thick cloth, especially one which you put on a bed to keep you warm

boldness (n)

the quality of being brave or confident

bow (v)

to briefly bend your body towards someone to show respect or to greet them

brush (v)

to touch lightly

bullet (n)

a small piece of metal which is fired from a gun

bush (n)

a plant which is like a small tree

business (n)

an activity, situation or series of events

Chief Constable (n)

a police officer in Britain (see Cultural notes)

circumstance (n)

condition which affects what happens in a particular situation

clergyman (n)

a religious leader of the Christian faith

cliff (n)

a high area of land with a very steep side, especially next to the sea

cocaine (n)

an addictive drug which people take for pleasure

coincidence (n)

when two or more events happen at the same time by chance

confirmation (n)

something that shows it is definitely true

contest (v)

to disagree formally with a decision or statement

cord (n)

a strong, thick string

damned (adj)

used to emphasize what someone is saying, especially when they are angry

darkest before dawn (exp)

this means things often look very bad just before they start to improve

deceased (n)

a person who has recently died

deceive (v)

to make someone believe something that is not true

disapproval (n)

indication that you do not like something or think it is wrong

divorce (n)

the legal end of a marriage

drug addict (n)

a person who uses or is addicted to illegal drugs

engaged (adj)

when two people have agreed to marry each other

era (n)

a period of time with a particular feature

exaggerate (v)

to make the thing you are talking about seem bigger or more important than it really is

executor (n)

a person who must make sure that people obey the instructions written in someone's will

fate (n)

a power that some people believe that controls everything that happens

fellow (n)

a man or boy

fever (n)

the state where your temperature is higher than usual because you are ill

fingerprint (n)

a mark made by a person's finger which shows the lines on the skin and can be used to identify criminals

fireworks (n)

small objects that are lit to entertain people on special occasions. They burn in a bright, attractive, and often noisy way.

forgery (n)

a person who copies a banknote, a document, or a painting, to make it look real

frame (n)

rigid structure around a window, picture or mirror

frown (v)

to move your eyebrows together because you are annoyed, worried, or thinking

full dose (n)

the complete amount of a medicine or a drug that should be taken at one time

funeral (n)

the ceremony that is held when someone has died

gain (n)

improvement, increase or benefit obtained from an action

gambler (n)

a person who bets money on the result of a game, a race, or competition

genuine (adj)

something that is real and exactly what it appears to be

get on (with) (phr v)

to have a friendly relationship with someone

globe (n)

an object shaped like the world

gossip (n)

informal conversation, often about other people's private affairs

grey cells (exp)

a reference to the brain

hangman's rope (n)

a strong cord that is used to hang a criminal

have access to (v)

to be able or allowed to go into a building or have contact with a person

heir/heiress (n)

someone who has the right to inherit a person's money, property, or title when that person dies. Heiress is the female form.

Home Secretary (n)

a member of the British government in charge of the Home Office

honourable (adj)

worthy of being respected or admired

hysteria (n)

a state of uncontrolled excitement or panic

imbecile (n)

a stupid person

inherit (v)

to receive money or property from someone who has died

invalid (n)

a person who is ill or disabled and needs to be cared for by someone else

inquest (n)

an official inquiry into the cause of someone's death

irrelevant (adj)

not important or not connected with the present situation or discussion

jealousy (n)

the feeling of anger or bitterness which someone has when they think that another person is trying to take a lover, friend, or possession, away from them

kitchen maid (n)

woman or girl who works in the kitchen

(the) late (adj)

used to refer to someone who is dead

lawn (n)

area of grass that is kept short, usually part of a garden or park

lawyer (n)

a person who is qualified to advise people about the law and represent them in court

lever (n)

a long bar which you use by placing one end under a heavy object so that when you press down on the other end, you can move the object

machine gun (n)

a gun which fires a lot of **bullets** very quickly one after the other

Madame (n)

a French title for a married or older woman

Mademoiselle (n)

a French title that refers to a young, unmarried woman

malaria (n)

serious disease caught from mosquitoes

mechanics (n)

the way which a system or engine works

medium (n)

a person who is believed to transmit messages to and from the spirit world

modest (adj)

not talking much about your abilities, achievements or possessions; not being very rich

mon ami (n)

French for 'my friend'

Monsieur (n)

a French title that refers to a man

mortgage (n)

a loan of money from a bank in order to buy a house

motive (n)

the reason for doing something

murderer (n)

a person who deliberately kills someone

Navy (n)

part of a country's military forces that fights at sea

nursing home (n)

a small private hospital

obstinate (adj)

when someone is determined to do that they want and refuses to do anything else

One should not keep a dog and have to bark oneself (exp)

this means that if you have someone employed to do a job for you, do not do the work yourself

operation (n)

when a surgeon cuts open your body in order to remove, replace, or repair a diseased or damaged part

pale (adj)

not strong or bright in colour

peril (n)

great danger

playing the game (exp)

doing the correct or moral thing

poison (n)

a substance that harms or kills animals or people when they eat or drink it

poisoned (adj)

when a person or animal has eaten or drunk a harmful or deadly substance

praise (n)

expression of approval for a person's qualities and/or achievements

pupil (n)

the small, round, black hole in the centre of the eye

purposeless (adj)

to be without a strong desire to achieve something

ridiculous (adj)

foolish or silly

scent (n)

perfume or the pleasant smell that something or someone has

séance (n)

a meeting in which a **medium** tries to communicate with the spirits of the dead

shawl (n)

a large piece of woollen cloth worn over a woman's shoulders or head, or wrapped around a baby

shoot (v)

to kill or injure people or animals by firing a gun at them

sliding panel (n)

flat piece of wood, or other material, used as a door that moves sideways to open or shut

spiritualist (n)

a person who is believed to be able to contact the spirit world

sternly (adv)

seriously or strictly

suicide (n)

the action of killing oneself deliberately

suppose (v)

to think about a possible situation or action considering what effects it would have

threat (n)

the danger that something unpleasant or harmful might happen

threatening (adj)

with the ability to inflict dangerous or unpleasant consequences

tide (n)

regular change in the level of the sea on the shore

trance (n)

a state in which a person seems to be asleep but can see and hear things and respond to commands

turn up (v)

to arrive, often unexpectedly or after you have been waiting a long time

twirl (v)

to turn something round and round quickly

vivid (adj)

clear and detailed

warrant (n)

an official document that gives the police permission to do something

will (n)

a document where you say what you want to happen to your money and property when you die

witness (v)

to write your name on a document that someone else has signed, to say that it really is their signature

would-be (adj)

describing what someone wants to be or become

wreath (n)

a ring of flowers and leaves that is put on the grave as a sign of remembrance for the dead person

yacht (n)

large boat with sails or a motor, used for racing or for pleasure trips

ALSO IN THE AGATHA CHRISTIE SERIES

The Mysterious Affair at Styles

Recently, there have been some strange things happening at Styles, a large country house in Essex. Evelyn Howard, a loyal friend to the family for years, leaves the house after an argument with Mrs Inglethorp. Mrs Inglethorp then suddenly falls ill and dies. Has she been poisoned? It is up to the famous Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, to find out what happened.

The Man in the Brown Suit

Pretty, young Anne Beddingfeld comes to London looking for adventure. But adventure finds her when she sees a man fall off an Underground platform and die on the rails. The police think the death was an accident. But who was the man in the brown suit who examined the body before running away? Anne has only one clue, but she is determined to find the mysterious killer. Anne's adventure takes her on a cruise ship all the way to Cape Town and on into Africa . . .

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

Roger Ackroyd was a man who knew too much. He knew the woman he loved had poisoned her first husband. He knew someone was blackmailing her – and now she has killed herself. When Roger Ackroyd is found murdered Hercule Poirot is called in to find out who the killer is.

The Murder at the Vicarage

When Colonel Protheroe is found murdered in the vicar's study, it seems that almost everyone in the village of St Mary Mead had a reason to kill him. This is the first case for Agatha Christie's famous female detective, Miss Marple. She needs to use all her powers of observation and deduction to solve the mystery.

Why Didn't They Ask Evans?

Bobby Jones is playing golf . . . terribly. As his ball disappears over the edge of a cliff, he hears a cry. The ball is lost, but on the rocks below he finds a dying man. With his final breath the man opens his eyes and says, 'Why didn't they ask Evans?' Bobby and his adventure-seeking friend Lady Frances set out to solve the mystery of the dying man's last words, but put their own lives in terrible danger . . .

Death in the Clouds

Hercule Poirot is travelling from France to England by plane. During the journey a passenger is murdered. Someone on the flight is guilty of the crime – but who could have a reason to kill an elderly lady? And how is it possible that no one saw it happen?

Appointment with Death

Mrs Boynton, cruel and hated by her family, is found dead while on holiday in the ancient city of Petra in Jordan. Was it just a weak heart and too much sun that killed her, or was she murdered? By chance, the great detective Hercule Poirot is visiting the country. He has 24 hours to solve the case.

N or M?

It is World War II and a British secret agent has been murdered. The murderers are Nazi agents living somewhere in England. They are known only as N and M, and could be anyone. The only clue as to where they are hiding points to the seaside village of Leahampton and its busy guesthouse, *Sans Souci*. Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, Britain's most unlikely spies, accept the mission to find N and M. No one can be trusted . . .

The Moving Finger

Lymstock is a small town with many secrets. Recently several people in the town have received unpleasant anonymous letters. When Mrs Symmington dies in mysterious circumstances after receiving a letter, the people of the town no longer know who they can trust. Who is writing the letters? And why? Miss Marple helps solve the mystery.

THE AGATHA CHRISTIE SERIES

The Mysterious Affair at Styles

The Man in the Brown Suit

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

The Murder at the Vicarage

Peril at End House

Why Didn't They Ask Evans?

Death in the Clouds

Appointment with Death

N or M?

The Moving Finger

Sparkling Cyanide

Crooked House

They Came to Baghdad

They Do It With Mirrors

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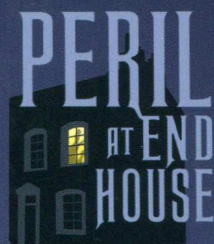
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Hercule Poirot, the famous detective, is on holiday in the south of England when he meets a lady called Nick Buckley. Nick has had a lot of mysterious 'accidents'. First, her car brakes failed. Then, a large rock just missed her when she was walking, and later, a painting almost fell on her while she was asleep. Finally, Poirot finds a bullet hole in her hat!

Nick is in danger and needs Poirot's help. Can he find the guilty person before Nick is harmed?

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